Sisters’ Service a Blessing to All

The Catholic Review

Many in the Archdiocese are probably aware of our Priests’ Council with whom I meet several times during the year. Consisting of 35 members representing various age groups, geographic locations, ministries, and religious and diocesan priests, this Council is both mandated by canon law and an invaluable assistance to me.

Less known, probably, is our FORUM of Religious, representing the leadership of communities of consecrated religious women and men active in the Archdiocese. I meet with them twice a year and I profit from their insights into the pastoral, educational and charitable mission we share throughout the Archdiocese.

One such meeting occurred last week, as sisters, brothers and priests came together for prayer and discussion on two main topics. Monsignor Bob Hartnett, Executive Director of our Blue Ribbon Committee on Schools, brought the group up to date on the progress of the Committee, whose final report will be due in June after exhaustive research and archdiocesan-wide consultation.

The second topic was one that reflects the serious concern of many, the Holy See’s mandate of an Apostolic Visitation of American Women Religious.

Having played a role in the 2005 Apostolic Visitation of Seminaries and Houses of Priestly Formation (the second such seminary visitation since the Vatican II Council), I cannot help but see some reactions on the sisters’ part which were very similar to those on the part of formation and seminary personnel at the announcement of both prior Visitations: Why us? Why now? Why the secrecy? Have we done something wrong? In time, once the process gained momentum, most of the seminaries accepted the Visitation and in the end even found it most beneficial.

I hope and pray the same will be said about the current Visitation.

I was not in a position to answer all the concerns of the FORUM members satisfactorily, but I did assure them of my full support and, indeed, of my admiration

of the women religious serving in our Archdiocese. During my two years' of pastoral visits I have been inspired by our sisters' selfless service in every area of ministry, including in our schools, health care institutions, and parishes. Likely because of their embrace of the vow of poverty, so very many of them, in the Spirit of Christ, instinctively reach out to the poor, hungry and homeless. The admiration they have won from both Catholics and non-Catholics for more than 200 years is a jewel in the crown of the Church in Baltimore.

As far as I can see, our women religious have nothing to fear from an Apostolic Visitation, and I will do all I can to assist in making this a positive experience for all involved.

This is not to say that all is perfect, as our sisters readily admit. The fact that some communities are receiving few if any vocations, for instance, is of real concern to them and the whole Church.

As in seminary life, so in religious life, the Second Vatican Council brought about many changes and involved, in some cases, experiments into forms of life and ministry which might depart from the founding purposes of the community in question. Canon law reserves for the Holy Father the authority to monitor such developments, "to take care that the institutes grow and flourish according to the spirit of the founders and sound traditions." An apostolic visitation is one way the Church carries out this responsibility. Might not a fresh, objective and reflective look into religious life over the last 45 years be of some help?

The Archdiocese of Baltimore, given our rich history, might well be unique in being home to the General or Provincial Offices of 16 apostolic congregations, 10 of women, six of men. In addition, during the past year, 36 different women's religious communities and 21 religious communities of men have advanced the mission of the Church here in serving the People of God in many ways.

My prayer, and I hope the prayer of all of us, will be that we will see the Holy Spirit's living presence in this Visitation with the result a strengthening of these communities which are such a blessing to us.