

## A Few Good Words From Sr. Dee Peppard BVM.

Dear People of St. Raymond,

Last month our Parish Council invited me to their meeting to talk about the current Vatican investigations of some of the women religious in the United States. Although this is a difficult and painful topic, it is one that the Council felt that we need to discuss.

The Vatican currently has two ongoing investigations. The first is a doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). The LCWR has about 1500 members and represents about 95% of the congregations of women religious in the United States (some 67,000 women religious). This investigation is directed from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; currently headed by Cardinal William Leveda, originally from the USA). As I understand it, the concern seems to be that the LCWR has not spoken aggressively enough in support of the Vatican's positions on women's ordination, homosexuality and the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church. Personally I find this curious because even well-respected theologians hold differing positions on these issues. The theological community itself has not reached consensus.

The second investigation, the "Apostolic Visitation" is of the "quality of life" of most of the women religious in the United States. It excludes however, those communities that are contemplative (those whose vocation is to pray and work in a monastery) or those congregations who have their motherhouses outside the USA (e.g. motherhouses in Rome or Canada, even though their sisters are ministering in our country). The target groups of the investigation are clearly those congregations that have motherhouses in the USA and are involved in "active ministry in the world." This is probably most of the religious communities whom we all know -- those who educated us, cared for us in health-care institutions, etc. These women, and the ones who went before them, truly built the church in the United States. Our church would not be as healthy as it is without the women religious who worked tirelessly as educators, health-care providers, proponents of social justice, care-givers to families in the inner city, etc.

The "Apostolic Visitation" was announced in January 2009 and is scheduled to be completed some time in 2011. It involves three phases: a one-to-one visit between the president/major superior of each congregation and Mother Clare Millea (appointed by the Vatican to implement this "visitation"). The second phase involved each congregation responding to a questionnaire and sending certain information to Rome. The third phase (which is currently going on) involves a team of visitors making an "on site" visitation to selected motherhouses.

All of this information will be given to Mother Clare, who will submit to the Vatican a report on each congregation. We will not see the report that is presented; so

there is no opportunity to check it for inaccuracies. The process itself has been difficult. Its secrecy does not represent the openness and transparency that we've come to expect of ourselves. The goal does not seem to be a mutual understanding. The motivation seems ambiguous. The stated concerns are two: the quality of life (of some) of the women religious, and the decline in numbers. (I can't help wonder if, in the mind of the Vatican, there's an unspoken "cause-effect" relationship here. That is, if we lived better, we'd have greater numbers.) However, the religious brothers and the priests (both religious and diocesan) are also experiencing a decline in numbers, and they are not being investigated. Certainly the decline in numbers is a concern, but it's a complex issue -- involving changing demographics, social changes, a renewed theology of Baptism (our primary identity as "church") and new opportunities for women and men to minister in our church.

I think it's important to recognize that the Church itself, in its official teaching role (Second Vatican Council) called women religious to renew our lives. And so we did. We entered into a process of theological education, formation and consequent updating. We prayed and studied the Gospels; we re-connected much more intimately with the charism (gift) of the women who founded our communities and we took seriously the Vatican Council's two documents on the church.

Through prayer, study and dialogue we realized that we were called to a more radical renewal than just making minor, surface adjustments (modified habits, more flexible schedules, etc.) We recognized that many of our congregations were being called out of a "monastic" mode of religious life. Prior to Vatican II, many of our communities lived as though we were monks in the convent (everyone on the same schedule, silence, etc.) -- but then we went out to teach school or do health-care. And when we came back home, we returned to a kind of monastic living.

As a result of this renewal process, we came to know the Spirit of God calling us into another form of religious life. We felt that we were called into the "world" that the documents of Vatican II embraced (after centuries of rejecting the world). Along with Vatican II, we came to recognize that the "world" is the locus of God's grace. Certainly there's evil in our world, but the world is also where we find God's presence and grace -- in our relationships, our work, and all the stuff of life. As women religious, we discovered that the former spirituality of "leaving the world" was no longer appropriate.

A disclaimer is in order: a minority of congregations choose to live this earlier spirituality. And that is

*(Continued on page 3)*

*(Continued from page 2)*

fine. We have a tradition of that in our church: Benedictine monasticism did not disappear when other forms of religious life (Franciscans, Dominicans, etc.) came on the scene. There are a variety of ways in which religious life can be expressed. It's not a "one size fits all!"

Since Vatican II we have been growing into a new form of religious life. We are ministerial religious. Ministry is integral to our identity and vocation. This call to ministry arises out of our Baptism (as does yours) -- but for us as women religious, it's specified by our public profession of vows, and it's discerned according to the charism and Constitutions of our particular congregations.

So what has this "Apostolic Visitation" meant for many of our congregations? What has the huge expenditure of energy and time (and some money too) meant for us? Even though this investigation is not justified, there have been some positive, albeit unintended consequences. As women religious, we have worked together to discern the best response to the investigation. And in doing this, we have realized some blessings. Throughout this entire process, we have claimed it as a moment of grace. Within my community we have had an incredible participation of our members as we dialogue deeply, pray and discern how we want to move forward as women in our church.

The leadership teams of the various congregations have also been working together in this process -- achieving an amazing solidarity and sense of hope. And we are using this energy, spirit and solidarity as we

move forward with a renewed commitment to God's Spirit calling us further.

As I reflect on all of this, it seems to me that the "Apostolic Visitation" is part of a larger issue. The larger picture is a clash of two different understandings of what we are as "church" (two different "ecclesiologies"). The pre-Vatican II church saw itself primarily as a "perfect society." Its theology was "triumphal," exclusive and mediated primarily through the hierarchy. The Vatican II church sees itself primarily as the "people of God," a "pilgrim church." Certainly there are specific roles in our church (hierarchy, theologians and the role of all of us, the "faithful"). Yet the church of Vatican II stresses that because of our Baptism, each of us has the responsibility to "be" church. And we struggle together, to find ways to do that.

The Church of St. Raymond -- you and me, all of us together -- tries to recognize the call and the challenge of the Spirit of God in our own times and circumstances. We try to live faithfully the Gospel values. We try to allow God's own Spirit to enlarge our hearts and expand our vision. And as we do this -- with the love, support and challenge of each other -- we are becoming "church" in a new way. And for this, I thank you. Thank you for your love, your support, your ministry, and for the many ways you are faithful to the Gospel.

God Bless,

*Dee Peppard, BVM.*

## **OFFICE OF THE PASTOR**

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## **Help Us Clean up the Mess!**



Recently, St. Raymond underwent a safety and hazard prevention review by a representative of the company that handles insurance matters for the Archdiocese. This is a review that is done at every parish every 3—4 years. One of the items that the company cited us for was the clutter that has accumulated in the basement of the gym — that is where various groups store their "Stuff" when not in use. For example, the theatre group, boy scouts, women's club, vacation bible school, and quite a few others. As you can see from the picture at the left, it indeed has become a disorganized mess. I have already worked with the Theatre Group to toss out some unused items. I would appreciate the heads of the various groups that have stuff stored in the basement to give me a call as soon as possible so that we can arrange a time to go through your storage area to see what we can eliminate or consolidate. Please contact me at the parish office at 847-253-8600 x 111, or [hmatecki@st-raymond.org](mailto:hmatecki@st-raymond.org). Thank you for your help.

**—Hank Matecki**