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Good morning!

It is an honor to be with you and to share with you some of the findings from our study.

This is a study that I longed wanted to do. When I began working at CARA, I quickly learned that there is a great deal of interest in religious life and particularly in women religious. I also learned that there is not a lot of good information – at least not comprehensive, reliable statistical data – that can tell us something about current realities and trends in religious life. In the absence of such data, people can and do make all kinds of assertions, usually to advance a particular perspective about what religious life should or should not be or how it should or should not be lived.

The last studies that really looked at the numbers in initial formation were done by Eleece King at CARA in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The most comprehensive study on religious life ever was the FORUS – Future of Religious Orders in the United States – study by David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis in the early 1990s. I wish we had all paid a lot more attention to their findings.

At any rate, in the absence of solid research since that time, there has been a great deal of conjecture about what is happening in religious life in recent years and some speculation that there actually has been a renewed interest in religious life, especially among younger people. While vocation directors will tell you that there continues to be a trend toward older vocations, many will also tell you that they have seen an increase in inquiries from younger people and a greater openness among young people to consider the possibility of a vocation to religious life.

So I really wanted to do a study like this to find out what's going on. Be careful what you wish for.

Although there is some good news and many signs of hope, the findings from the study are sobering, especially for communities like ours.

The good news is that men and women continue to be called to religious life and to respond to that call, although in much smaller numbers than we became accustomed to 40 or 50 years ago. A sign of hope is that there does seem to be some evidence for a renewed interest in religious life among young people. For the most part, however, it is not in communities like ours.

The most successful institutes in terms of attracting and retaining new members at this time

are those that follow a more traditional style of religious life in which members live together in community and participate in daily Eucharist, pray the Divine Office, and engage in devotional practices together. They also wear a religious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium. All of these characteristics and practices are especially attractive to the young people who are entering religious life today.

Rightly or wrongly, those coming to religious life do not see us as offering what they feel called to: a strong community life, regular communal prayer, and clear identity in and with the Catholic Church.

Actually, I think part of the problem is that they do not see us.

Many young people today, including those who are now in religious life, had little or no exposure to men and women religious when they were growing up and few actually knew religious sisters, brothers, or priests. I heard this many times in the interviews and focus groups we conducted for the study.

The comments of one young woman in particular have really stuck with me. She said, "I think there was a sister in my parish." And then she paused and looked at me and said, "I think she had a pin like yours, so maybe she was a Sister of Mercy." It saddened me that she did not know if she had met a Sister of Mercy.

It made me wonder if the young people I have been privileged to work with over the years would know that I am a sister and that I am a Sister of Mercy. While some would, I have to admit that many probably would not. And that saddens me too because I now realize that I could have done a much better job of being more explicit about my own identity and about the beauty of religious life.

As I have reflected on the findings from our study, one of the things that strikes me most is the fact that young people – and some who are not so young – do not know women religious in the way previous generations did.

I was not here yesterday to hear the keynote from Cokie Roberts, but I have heard that she said that the decline in vocations is not our fault. There are forces at work beyond our control. While that's certainly true to some extent, I personally don't think we should let ourselves off the hook so easily.

I am not here to tell you how we should interpret or act upon the findings from our study, but I do think we can do a better job of communicating who we are and what we offer. I hope some of the findings from our study will help us reflect on who we are and point to ways to share that with those who might be called to join us.

## **Study Details**

The study was designed to identify and understand the characteristics, attitudes, and experiences of the men and women who are coming to religious life today as well as the characteris-

tics and practices of the religious institutes that are successfully attracting new candidates and retaining new members.

The study is based on four major research components:

(1) The first phase of the research was a single informant survey of religious institutes that was sent to major superiors using lists provided by CMSM, LCWR, and CMSWR, as well as lists compiled by CARA of those that do not belong to any of the leadership conferences, primarily communities of contemplative nuns and some of the new religious communities. The survey was designed to gather statistics about membership, including the numbers in initial formation or incorporation; basic information about vocation promotion and formation; and basic data about the institute's ministries, community life, community prayer, and practices regarding the wearing of a religious habit. In addition, respondents were asked to provide the names and contact information for those in initial formation as well as those who had professed final vows since 1993. This list served as the mailing list for the survey of new members.

(2) The second phase of the research was a survey of those new members. The survey was designed to identify what attracted these candidates and new members to religious life and to their particular religious institute; what they found helpful in their discernment process; what their attitudes and preferences are regarding community life, prayer, ministry, and the wearing of a religious habit; and what sustains and challenges them in religious life. The survey also asked about their background characteristics as well as their experience before entering religious life. In addition, the survey included a question asking the respondent if he or she would be willing to participate in a focus group.

(3) The third phase included focus groups with new members to explore issues similar to those examined in the survey. Specifically, they were designed to gather insights from newer members about what attracts, sustains, and challenges them in religious life. The discussions were also directed toward understanding the attitudes and experiences of new members and especially toward identifying "best practices" for vocation and formation ministry that would assist men and women in discerning and responding to a call to religious life.

(4) The final phase of the research was an examination of selected institutes that have experienced some success in attracting and retaining new members in recent years. At a minimum, this examination included an interview with the vocation director and a review of vocation promotion materials and practices. In most cases, the examination also included interviews with the novice director and/or other formation directors. In a few cases, it included interviews with leadership and interviews or focus groups with new members. These institutes did not necessarily have the highest numbers of new members, but were selected to represent different types of institutes and to help identify best practices in vocation promotion and retention.

Before I get to the findings, I would like to share two passages from Scripture that came to mind as I was preparing this presentation:

First, from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12: 4-7, 13):

There are different gifts but the same Spirit;  
There are different ministries but the same Lord;  
There are different works but the same God  
    Who accomplishes all of them in every one.  
To each person the manifestation of the Spirit  
    is given for the common good...  
All of us have been given to drink of the one Spirit.

And then from the Gospel according to John (John 14: 1):

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house.

The findings from the study show that there are indeed many different gifts and many different manifestations of the Spirit, but the statistics about religious life today can be rather discouraging and can indeed trouble our hearts.

### **Religious Life and Religious Institutes Today**

There is a great deal of variety and diversity in religious life today not only in terms of the spirituality, charism, and mission of religious institutes but also in terms of their size, composition, and presence of new members. Although most religious institutes in the United States are experiencing aging membership, diminishing numbers, and few, if any, new vocations, some continue to attract new members and a few are experiencing significant growth.

At last count, there were approximately 77,000 men and women religious in the United States (USCCB): about 13,000 religious priests, 5,000 religious brothers, and 59,000 religious sisters and nuns. I would guess that we are now down to fewer than 75,000.

That's down from over 215,000 in the mid-1960s when the numbers of men and women religious reached their peak at about 23,000 religious priests, 12,500 religious brothers, and 180,000 religious sisters and nuns. That represents a decline of about 65 percent.

Although our numbers today are considerably lower than they once were, it is important to recognize that the large numbers that we had in the 1960s were the exception not the rule historically.

Contrary to what many people seem to think, it is not true that we always had high numbers that suddenly dropped in the late 1960s, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Instead, the numbers grew rather dramatically in the 1950s and early 1960s and only reached those very high numbers for a year or two in the mid-1960s and then dropped off rather rapidly at first as many who entered in those peak years left and then steadily since then as members aged and died and much smaller numbers entered.

At the same time that our numbers are diminishing, we are also an aging population. Three in four finally professed men (75 percent) and more than nine in ten finally professed women

(91 percent) are age 60 and over in 2009. There are now more women religious over the age of 90 than under the age of 60. Among both men and women, a majority of those under the age of 60 are in their 50s. There are very few of us in our 40s and even fewer in their 20s and 30s. In LCWR institutes, fewer than 7 percent are under age 50 and less than 1 percent under age 40. While this presents some challenges for new members, especially those who are younger, it has not deterred those who entered from doing so.

### **Initial Formation and New Membership**

The study identified at least 2,630 men and women in initial formation or incorporation and nearly 4,000 who are either in initial formation or who had professed final vows within the previous 15 years. The actual number of new members is likely even higher given that some religious institutes did not respond to the survey and/or did not provide information about members who had professed final vows since 1993.

Three-fourths of institutes of men (78 percent) and two-thirds of institutes of women (66 percent) have at least one person currently in initial formation (candidate or postulant, novice, or temporary professed). However, most institutes that have someone in initial formation have no more than a few. Among institutes whose leaders belong to LCWR, three-fourths have either no one (32 percent) or just one or two (41 percent) in initial formation. Only a few (9 percent) have more than five. Some of these are institutes that recently reconfigured, bringing together a number of congregations or provinces that separately had no one or only a few in formation. (Some have habits and a few are members of both LCWR and CMSWR.)

### **Characteristics of New Members**

Compared to men and women religious in the last century, those coming to religious life today are much more diverse in terms of their age, racial and ethnic background, and life experience. Many come with considerable education as well as ministry and work experience. The diversity among new members presents a number of challenges for formation as well as for life and ministry in many religious institutes.

Compared to their predecessors, those coming to religious life today are older, more likely to come from Hispanic/Latino(a) (21 percent), Asian or Pacific Islander (14 percent), and, to a lesser extent, African or African American (6 percent) backgrounds, much more likely to have at least a bachelor's degree (70 percent), to have work experience (89 percent, 82 percent full-time), and to have experience in ministry (72 percent, 31 percent full-time).

Compared to other new member in our study, those in LCWR institutes tend to be older (56 percent in initial formation are age 40 and older), to be more highly educated at the time they enter, and to bring more experience in the workplace and in ministry. They are also more likely to have been married (13 percent) and to have children (10 percent).

Before I go on, I would like to say a little about the generational differences.

Most of you, I'm sure, are familiar the categorization of Catholics into the Pre-Vatican II, Vatican II, and Post-Vatican II Generations. I always hasten to add that these are based on year of

birth not on theology or ecclesiology. I don't have time to go into a description of each of these generations, but I do want to say a little about the youngest generation, the Millennials.

The Millennial Generation includes those born in 1982 or later, so the leading edge of this generation is just beginning to reach the late-20s. Members of this generation tend to be community- and service-oriented as well as interested in spirituality and questions of faith. They also tend to be optimistic in their outlook, tolerant of differences among people, and positive in their attitudes toward authority. This generation has come of age under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

On the whole, Millennials are far less likely to be steeped in the Catholic culture of earlier generations of Catholics and are less attached to the Church and knowledgeable about their faith. However, those who are active in the Church – and many are not – tend to be very positive in their attitudes about the Church and more traditional in their religious beliefs and practices. However, they are turned off by words like “traditional” and “progressive” and talk about divisions between “liberals” and “conservatives” or about what Vatican II did or did not accomplish. To borrow from a phrase from President Obama, I think for them it is not a red Church or a blue Church, it is the Catholic Church.

What the research has been suggesting about Millennials is largely what we found in this study. While the Millennials are still a relatively small segment of those in religious life, they are our future and I think we need to pay attention to them. I also think we need to be aware that the dominant age groups in religious life are those in the 60s, 70s, and early 80s who may think about things, especially regarding the Church, very differently.

### **Attraction to Religious Life and to a Particular Religious Institute**

New members report that they were drawn to religious life primarily by a sense of call and a desire for prayer and spiritual growth and to their particular religious institute by the example of its members, and especially by their sense of joy, their down to earth attitude, and their commitment. To only a slightly lesser degree, most new members also say they were attracted to religious life by a desire to be of service and a desire to be part of a community. They were attracted to their particular religious institute by its spirituality, community life, and prayer life. When asked about their decision to enter their particular religious institute, new members cite the community life in the institute as the most influential factor in their decision (followed closely by the prayer life or prayer styles in the community).

Although the ministries of the institute are also important to most new members, they are less important than spirituality, prayer, community, and lifestyle. Questions about ministry, especially the possibility of a variety of ministries, tend to be more important to men than to women among new members.

Younger respondents are more likely than older respondents to say they were attracted to religious life by a desire to be more committed to the Church and to their particular institute by its fidelity to the Church. Many also report that their decision to enter their institute was influenced by its practice regarding a religious habit. We found significant generational gaps throughout the study, especially between the Millennial Generation (born in 1982 or later) and the Vatican II Generation (born between 1943 and 1960), on questions involving the Church

and the habit. Differences between the two generations also extend to questions about community life as well as styles and types of prayer.

### **Acquaintance with the Religious Institute**

When we asked new members how they first became acquainted with their religious institute, we found that they did so in many different ways. The most common experience was in an institution, such as a school, where the members served. Other relatively common ways of becoming acquainted with the institute include through the recommendation of a friend or advisor, through working with a member of the institute, through a friend in the institute, and through print or online promotional materials.

Men are more likely than women to report that they first encountered their religious institute in a school or other institution where the members served. Women are more likely than men to indicate that they learned about their institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor. Older respondents are somewhat more likely than younger respondents to have met the institute more directly, that is, through working with a member or through a friend in the institute. Younger respondents, especially those in the Millennial Generation, are more likely to have first heard about the institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor or through print or online promotional materials.

Some younger members did not know a man or woman religious before they sensed a call to religious life. Many of these young religious first learned about their particular institute through the recommendation of a friend or advisor, often a priest, and many found out or learned more about their institute online. Direct experience with the institute and its members through “Come and See” experiences, discernment retreats, and other opportunities to spend time with members are especially important for this age group.

For those in LCWR institutes, the most common ways of getting to know us are through institutions where members served (41 percent) and through working with a member of the institute (31 percent). We are attracting those who already know us well, usually for a long time.

### **Prayer and Spirituality**

Many new members identify common prayer as one of the aspects of religious life that most attracted them and that most sustains them now. When asked about the importance of various types of communal prayer, respondents are most likely to name daily Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours as the prayer types that are most important to them.

Millennial Generation respondents are much more likely than other respondents – especially those from the Vatican II Generation – to say that daily Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, and other devotional prayers are “very” important to them. Compared to younger respondents, older respondents place greater importance on faith-sharing and, to a lesser degree, on non-liturgical common prayer. For respondents from LCWR institutes, faith-sharing is more important than any other type of common prayer we asked about.

## **Community Life and Ministry Setting Preferences**

As I already noted, new members cite community life in the institute as the most influential factor in their decision to enter their particular religious institute. Most new members indicate that they want to live, work, and pray with other members of their religious institute, with the last being especially important to them.

When asked about various living arrangements, most new members prefer to live in a large (eight or more) or medium-sized (four to seven) community and to live only with other members of their religious institute. Younger respondents express even stronger preferences for living with members of their institute in large community settings. This holds not only for the Millennials, but also for those in their 30s and 40s in the Post-Vatican II Generation.

Most new member do not want to live alone or even in communities of two or three. Findings from the survey of religious institutes suggest that that new membership is negatively correlated with the number of members living alone. That is, the higher the number of members who live alone, the less likely an institute is to have new members.

When asked about various ministry settings, most new members indicate a relatively strong preference for ministry with other members of their institute and ministry sponsored by their institute. Again, these preferences are much stronger among younger new members. Very few new members, especially in the youngest age cohorts, prefer ministry with a non-Catholic or non-religious organization or even one that is Catholic but not sponsored by their institute.

## **Practices Regarding the Religious Habit**

As I have already noted, for some new members, especially those who are younger, the decision to enter their religious institute was influenced by its practices regarding a religious habit. Interviews with vocation directors also suggest that many who are inquiring into religious life are looking for the possibility of wearing a habit even in those institutes in which few, if any, members regularly do so.

About two-thirds of the new members we surveyed are in institutes that wear a religious habit. For a little more than half of these new members (55 percent), the habit is required in all or most circumstances and for a few more (16 percent) it is required only at certain times, such as for ministry or prayer. In the focus group discussions, a few of the participants were either strongly in favor or strongly opposed to requiring habits, while some saw the value of wearing a habit or clerical dress in at least some circumstances.

Among those who report that the habit is optional, 14 percent of men and 15 percent of women saying they wear it in all or most circumstances, and 90 percent of men and 27 percent of women say they wear it as least once in a while. Among those who report that their institute does not have a habit, almost half of the men (48 percent) and almost a quarter of the women (23 percent) say they would wear a habit if they had that option. That's also almost a quarter of the women in LCWR institutes.

## **Challenges in and for Religious Life Today**

In response to questions about what they find most challenging about religious life, new members identified a range of issues and concerns. Some of these are perennial issues in religious life: the challenges of living in community, overcoming personal weaknesses, faithfully living the vows, and balancing personal, communal, and ministerial responsibilities.

Some of the challenges identified by new members are more unique to this particular time in the history of religious life in the United States: aging and diminishment in their religious institutes; age and experience differences among new members as well as between new and older members in community; diversity or lack of diversity in their institute; the lack of peers in religious life and in their religious institute; and differences in theology and ecclesiology, often across generational lines. Some see the polarization within the Church and within religious life itself as one of the greatest challenges.

## **Hope for the Future**

Although many of the participants in the study expressed concerns about the future of religious life and the future of their religious institutes, most remain hopeful, although sometimes disheartened by the apathy, pessimism, and fatalism they see in some of the members of their institutes. Most acknowledge that the numbers in religious life may continue to decline and that their religious institutes may be different in the future. Nonetheless, they believe religious life will persevere and that the Spirit can and will move in that diminishment. Some already see signs of hope, especially in a younger generation that they believe is bringing a new energy and optimism to religious life.