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Personal Memo from Sr. Maura O'Donohue MMM: Meeting at SCR, Rome, 18 February 1995

Personal Memo

Date: 21 February 1995

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We were met by His Eminence, Cardinal Martinez who thanked us for the report and asked that we would explore in greater depth the questions raised. Because of the technical language involved he had arranged that 3 of the staff whose first language was English would meet us. This was to ensure that the various nuances involved in the discussions would not be missed. The Cardinal hoped that further clarification would be possible on some points and also that we would make some suggestions or proposals about taking the matter forward. We then met the other members of staff who were appointed to discuss with us.

Following introductions by Bishop John Crowley and the SRC staff members (Fr. John Farren, OP, Fr. Richard Yeo, OSB, and Sr. Sharon Holland, IHM) it was clear that there was no pre-arranged agenda. We suggested a brief up-date, as my report had been submitted a year earlier. The emphasis of the update was on the fact that this extra 12 months experience confirmed in every respect the deep concerns already expressed in the report. Some good things were happening in terms of workshops with Conferences of Religious, especially of women, and Conference of Bishops at national or regional levels. However, there were some sad experiences also.

The following were the main points made:

- HIV/AIDS continues to spread in society in general. There is a corresponding increase in the numbers of priests and religious dying from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. There are no accurate statistics so it is impossible to know how many are really infected with HIV.
- Responses on the part of Church-related personnel has been varied and the patterns of response can be summed up as:
 - i) loving concern, care and compassion for priests and religious dying from HIV/AIDS, - which is rare
 - ii) secret and denial about the HIV-infected members
 - iii) stigma, marginalisation, isolation, rejection and open hostility.
- Reference was made to examples in the report of the lack of expressed concern and care, and further examples were given of priests having left isolated in hospital by their confreres, without visitors for several

weeks or even months; some were sent home to their villiages for their mothers or families to take care of them.

- The extent of abuse of sisters by clergy in different contexts, i.e., as parish priests or spiritual directors was discussed. These abuses included candidates who approach a parish priest for the necessary certificates and testimonial letters being subjected to rape. Some congregations have now decided not to request candidates to bring such certificates, and indeed should a candidate present herself with such testimonial letters superiors are loathe to accept them because of the possibility of their having been raped or that they are already pregnant.
- In this context it was pointed out that in many cultures it is impossible for a woman or adolescent to say “No” to a man, especially an older man, and particularly so to a priest. This results from the low status of women in these societies, their lack of formal education and the fact that priests are put on pedestals and are recognised as educated members of the society.
- This led to a discussion about the vulnerability of sisters of diocesan congregations, because of their dependence on local clergy. Mention was made of the fact that many sisters in these congregations are not aware that they can request Pontifical recognition. I was asked what could be done to assist diocesan congregations or their status. Admitting that I had not given this much thought I raised the feasibility of considering inculturation of religious life and the possibility of members of diocesan congregations not making perpetual vows. Having perpetual vows exclusively taken by members of congregations of Pontifical Right might encourage seeking pontifical recognition. It was pointed out that when local congregations get recognition of Pontifical status they no longer get funding from the diocese, which can also add to their vulnerability.
- The members were aware of the situation in Malawi where the central administration staff had been dismissed (deposed) by the Local Ordinary. However, they were unaware that nothing had been done until they received my report. Neither were they aware of the reason for the dismissal.
- Examples were also given of situations where priests were bringing sisters (and other young women) to Catholic health institutions for abortion. Some of my lay professional colleagues have approached me about this with questions as to what to do or whether they should resign as employees of such hospitals. I gave one example of a priest who had brought a sister for an abortion. She died during the procedure and the priest officiated at the Requiem Mass. The response was of stunned silence. I asked if that priest could hope to get any assistance.
- On the question of the workshops I was asked how we (Fr. Vitillo and I) conducted these. On mentioning that the workshops lasted several days, sometimes for 2 weeks, they were extremely surprised as they though workshops would be for an hour or a “session.” I responded by explaining the need for very basic information in relation to anatomy, physiology, biology, as well as the aspects of human development, human relationships, sexual theology and spirituality, and the pastoral implications.
- We emphasised our concern that the information we had shared was already to an extent in the public forum, [two illegible words] lay

people and other members of the laity aware of the abuses. In some situations there had been publicity in the papers. Also as a result of the various representatives which had been made to me these issues are now being discussed at workshops or meetings of the conferences of religious. This fact is in marked contrast to what had been happening earlier, where superiors were too embarrassed to discuss the issues, fearing theirs was the only congregation thus affected. There is now a certain sense of solidarity and sharing, as well as expressed anger by superiors and sisters because of the injustices involved.

- How celibacy is understood in some cultures was also discussed and the example was given of a Vicar General in one diocese who discussed this matter quite openly, saying that “celibacy in the African context means a priest does not get married, but does not mean he does not have children.”

We then made the following suggestions.

1. The idea of a communication from the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes through the appropriate channels, to religious congregations throughout the world with respect to the treatment of their members who have HIV and AIDS to address the question of care, treatment and support by the religious societies concerned. This would include the idea of guiding their care with love and compassion and supporting them in their sickness and suffering. Such a communication would give enormous encouragement in many situations where fear blocks a response that is in keeping with human dignity and Gospel values. It would be a tangible and welcome sign from the Holy see at a time when the numbers of religious men and women with HIV is increasing.

2. In relation to the widespread abuses we suggested the appointment by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes of an Apostolic Visitor to investigate first hand the matters which we have brought to their attention. We suggested that part or all of the AMECEA Region of Africa might be an appropriate geographical area as an initial response given our awareness of the serious concerns of local religious in these countries. Given the nature and delicacy of the questions involved we felt it would be important that a woman participate in any such team. Such a visitation on a low key basis would give enormous encouragement to local religious who have pleaded with us to bring these matters directly to the attention of the Holy See. It would be seen as a potent sign of pre-occupation and sollicitous care for those same religious.

3. The vulnerability of the Diocesan Congregations was very much on our minds and we shared our concerns. Their relationships with the Holy See and the Local Ordinaries is something we are not competent to address. Nevertheless we expressed the hope that some mechanism could be introduced to allow abuses of the nature mentioned in the report to be directly brought to the attention of the Holy See.

4. We also expressed the hope that some specific action could be taken by the Sacred Congregation to advise and guide all religious congregations in the wake of abuse and pregnancy, whilst equally underlining our concern that counselling and support be made available to those who are seen as the abusers.

5. We further suggested that the idea of education of religious in respect to human development, human relationships, sexuality, celibacy and affective maturity could be reinforced as part of the formation programmes. If any inter-Dicasterial liaison could be set up we could be ready to collaborate fully.

6. We were aware that so much of the discussion crosses Dicasterial boundaries and we expressed the hope that an inter-Dicasterial Task Force might be contemplated, involving the Sacred Congregations for Religious and Secular Institutes, of Evangelisation of People and of Bishops to look at the various implications of what we had discussed in the interests of Bishops, Diocesan clergy, religious and laity, and the good name of the Catholic Church.

We emphasised that we could not minimise our anxiety about the possible repercussions of inaction to the mission and standing of the Church in the future and we expressed a willingness to offer any help or cooperation in taking these matters forward.

Maura O'Donohue MMM

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