

December 20, 1984

Dear Sisters of the North American Provinces,

The purpose of this letter is to share with you a situation involving our congregation. The information is meant for you personally; we ask that you use it – within and outside the congregation – only if necessary.

Recently, an ad was published in the NEW YORK TIMES entitled “A DIVERSITY OF OPINIONS REGARDING ABORTION EXISTS AMONG COMMITTED CATHOLICS.” The ad was signed by about 95 people – laity, priests, brothers, and sisters. Two of our sisters, Jeannine Gramick (BA) and Margaret Ellen Traxler (MK) were among the signers.

Sister Mary Margaret Johanning and other General Superiors of the men and women religious who signed the ad received a letter regarding this matter from the SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES. The letter stated that because the ad indicated that there is an acceptable stance on the abortion question other than the church’s official teaching, the two sisters are to make a public retraction about the signed statement: if either sister chooses not to retract the statement publicly, procedures for her dismissal from the congregation are to be followed.

Because this matter has become public, because you may be asked about the situation, and because we need your prayer, trust, and support as we work with this matter, we share this information with you. We are working with the two sisters involved, with the leaders of other religious congregations and others concerned to determine how to follow God’s call in this situation for the good of all.

We ask your prayer for wisdom and that we be open to God’s Spirit.

Gratefully and prayerfully,

Sister Mary Margaret Johanning, SSND
General Superior

Sister Patricia Flynn, SSND
Provincial Leader, Baltimore Province

Sister Maureen Murray, SSND
Provincial Leader, Mankato Province

March 25, 1985

Dear Sisters of North America,

The last time we communicated with you as sisters of North America, it was via our letter of December 20, 1984. In that letter we informed you that two of our sisters were among those who signed the October 7, 1984, ad in the *New York Times* and that Sister Mary Margaret Johanning had received a letter regarding this matter from Archbishop Hamer of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes. The intent of our letter to you was to communicate basic information. Since that letter was sent, much has appeared in the press regarding the signing of the ad, Archbishop Hamer's letter, and related topics.

Many of you have expressed to those of us directly concerned, Sisters Jeannine Gramick, Margaret Ellen Traxler, and the three of us, your prayerful support and concerns regarding this matter. We are grateful to you and trust that your prayer and support continue to be with us. We would like to share some additional information with you now, knowing that you are interested in how we School Sisters of Notre Dame have been, and are, handling this matter.

In early December, 1984, after receiving Archbishop Hamer's letter, Sister Mary Margaret contacted the two provincial leaders concerned, Sisters Maureen Murray and Patricia Flynn, and asked them to handle the matter with Sisters Margaret Ellen and Jeannine respectively. Sister Mary Margaret informed Archbishop Hamer that she had delegated the matter to the two provincial leaders and that she would stay in communication with them and with him. Sister Mary Margaret also attended meetings of the general superiors in Rome who had received similar letters from Archbishop Hamer.

Sisters Maureen and Patricia have spoken with Sisters Margaret Ellen and Jeannine respectively via phone and in person. In addition, the two provincial leaders have met with leaders – provincial and general – of congregations in the United States and with others concerned. At one meeting the leaders of the various congregations met with most of the women religious who signed the *New York Times* ad.

In an effort to keep the sisters of their provinces informed and to foster dialogue on the basic issues involved, Sisters Maureen and Patricia also discussed this matter with their respective provincial chapters. Recently, the Baltimore and Mankato provincial councils met with Sisters Jeannine and Margaret Ellen respectively in order to clarify what the sisters intended in their signing of the ad, to verify the fact that they do not support abortion, and to ascertain their understanding of the church's teaching regarding abortion.

At the regular meeting of the provincial leaders of North America, the regional leaders of Guam, Japan, and Puerto Rico, and Sister Mary Margaret which was held at Chatawa,

Mississippi, March 20-25, Sisters Mary Margaret, Maureen and Patricia, shared a chronological overview of events concerning the signing of the ad. Points from the group's reflections are giving in the enclosed letter.

In the near future Sister Mary Margaret will be in communication with Archbishop Hamer regarding how we School Sisters of Notre Dame have been and are dealing with his request.

This entire matter may seem very clear, simple, and direct to some of you, but it can also be perceived as very complex, with serious effects for the church and religious life in the United States. According to Archbishop Hamer's letter, the basic difficulty centers on the underlined sentence from the following quotation from the ad: "Statements of recent Popes and of the Catholic hierarchy have condemned the direct termination of pre-natal life as morally wrong in all instances. There is the mistaken belief in American society that this is the only legitimate Catholic position." A different difficulty for many is the manner in which the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes responded to the signing of the ad.

Perhaps many of you have not had access to publications that have printed a copy of the original documents involved in this situation. Even though it is late, we are enclosing a copy of the *New York Times* ad and of Archbishop Hamer's letter as they were published in *Origins*, December 6, 1984, and January 17, 1985, respectively. It is important that we be knowledgeable of the actual facts and that our thinking and speaking are based on fact and reality.

We need to acknowledge that we possess different perceptions, convictions, and values about church, authority, life and religious life, and about living out our commitment. We need to respect diversity, yet be united in essentials. It is important that we love one another deeply enough to differ, to sustain one another in our differences, to speak the truth in love to one another. Perhaps, more than ever before, we are called upon to believe in God, ourselves, and one another and to "trust one another, presuming the good will of each" (G.D. 2.c.)

We assure you of our prayer and support as we continue consciously to undergird the diversity we experience with love for one another and with faith. We ask for and trust in your support and prayer as we continue to work together regarding the signing of the *New York Times* ad and related issues and concerns.

Gratefully and prayerfully,
Sister Mary Margaret Johanning, SSND
General Superior

Sister Patricia Flynn, SSND
Sister Maureen Murray, SSND

