

# Sister Lynn's Gift of Canon Law

BY LYCETTE BELISLE, COMMUNICATIONS INTERN



Sister Lynn Jarrell originally wanted to teach, but said that all changed when she was asked to study canon law. Sister Lynn described a canon lawyer as one who is fully trained in the law of the Catholic Church, or canon law, as well as the current law, and obtains an ecclesiastical degree approved by a Catholic Church authority.

“You practice law for whoever wants to engage you, which is often a bishop and his diocese or teaching in a seminary,” Sister Lynn shared. “At this point in time, I am working with religious communities across the world, and there’s all kinds of needs that come up.”

She stated that it’s not so much the traveling, as it is experiencing life beyond the borders of Louisville, that has impacted her. In the last five years she has been to Zambia, in southern Africa, twice, most recently to give a six-day retreat on religious life to a province of an international community. She was in Vienna, Austria, from January to February of this year, acting as the canonist for a pre-chapter meeting of another international community.

Sister Lynn was in South Africa for ten days this past August for the gathering of young members of an international community discussing future planning.

Sister Lynn reflected that, “When you’re moving around, living and working in different places, your world perspective does change.”

Sister Lynn has done a significant amount of work nationally, stating that she is a “totally different person because of the opportunities and the experience, and humbled to be in the middle of all this conversation with people.” According to her, national work is similar to international work, because even though you may not be in a different country, the culture in one city can be completely different from that of another city.

Sister Lynn has been a canon lawyer since 1984, and says that apart from serving on the Leadership Team twice, it is all she has ever done. She first served as vice president for four years, opting not to be reelected so that she could resume her canon law work, and then as president for six years just before Sister Janet Marie Peterworth was elected. Sister Lynn served on an advisory committee for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) during her time in leadership, a four-year term that she deemed as “extremely insightful” and used some of her canonical expertise.

During her time as president, Sister Lynn was not professionally out consulting, but she did use canon law at times. “We had the Apostolic Visitation in 2009 when I was president and I was extremely active nationally in trying to help religious communities respond to Rome,”

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she shared. In 2009, the office in the Vatican for religious (The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life) decided that the active American religious communities were in error and should be investigated via an Apostolic Visitation. Sister Lynn was involved in assisting Rome to realize how wrong they were to investigate the communities.

In addition to consulting, Sister Lynn engages in teaching opportunities. She has served as a faculty member and now director of the Institute of Law and Religious Life; has taught at different colleges during the summers, and participated in various presentations. “Trying to help people grasp a concept and understand what they need to do with it,” she says, “that’s really how I approach ‘presenting,’ so I use a lot of process, which is a nice word for teaching technique.”

Sister Lynn encourages others to consider joining the field of canon law, describing it as an opportunity to “understand the law and use it in the healthiest way possible, so that it’s life-giving and respectful of the values. There is wisdom in the norms or principles



Sister Lynn (left, in green) with one of the communities she has served as a canon lawyer

underpinning the law, but sometimes the application has to be expanded.”

Although she loves what she does, Sister Lynn did express a desire to sometimes be more stable. She shared that she is honored and grateful for the opportunity to continue doing what she does. Because she is away a lot, she unfortunately misses things like funerals. “It just keeps enriching my prayer life and my understanding of myself,” Sister Lynn said, “even as I age into a situation of, ‘How much longer am I going to be able to do this?’” 🙏

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