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International nun's group supports U.S. women religious

by Thomas C. Fox



IUSG board: Amelia Kawaji, Therezinha Rasera, Ma. Soledad Galer n, Carol Regan, Louise Madore, M. Carola Thomann, Viviana Ballarin, Maureen Cusick (not in the photo).

The Catholic church's top women religious organization this week issued a strong supportive statement for U.S. women religious congregations under investigation by the Vatican. The organization praised U.S. women religious for living out the mandates of the Second Vatican Council.

"We affirm unequivocally our support for our sisters in the United States," the statement of the International Union of Superiors General's executive board reads.

"Their response to the mandates of the Second Vatican Council, particularly as stated in *Perfectae Caritatis*, has been a great gift, not only to the pluralistic society in which they live, but also to the universal church. Our desire is to assist them in facing the challenges which we share."

Perfectae Caritatis is a Vatican council document, issued in 1965, that called upon women religious to renew their congregations in the spirit of their founders in order to meet the needs of the times.

The work of the renewal took women religious, including U.S. women religious congregations, into many new social ministries. It also led to more collective leadership styles in many congregations.

“As (religious) leaders,” the statement reads, “we are confident that our members all over the world join us in our prayers for success and blessing on the Apostolic Visitation of our sisters in the United States.”

The board of the International Union of Superiors General met in Rome last week. The group has roots dating back to the pontificate of Pope Pius XII. It provides an international forum for superiors general of institutes of Catholic women religious worldwide. The union, formalized following Vatican II, became a means of connecting women religious congregations, along with their renewal efforts, with the council fathers.

It was last January that the Vatican’s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life announced that it had begun an Apostolic Visitation, or comprehensive study, of institutes of U.S. women religious.

The action was initiated by the Congregation’s prefect, Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, in a decree issued last December. That decree indicated the Visitation was being undertaken in order to examine the quality of the life of women religious with an eye on learning why their numbers had fallen in recent decades.

The Visitation is being conducted under the direction of Superior General of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mother Clare Millea, whom Rodé appointed Apostolic Visitor.

Mother Millea, a Connecticut native, heads the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, an international religious institute headquartered in Rome. For the past few months she has been interviewing leaders of various U.S. women religious orders.

This Apostolic Visitation is the first since the mid-1980s when Pope John Paul II appointed a commission led by then-Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco to study religious life in the United States, with a special focus on women’s communities. That commission filed its report with the late pope in October 1986.

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The international union’s statement this week encourages women religious to cooperate fully throughout the visitation phases. “We pray that the visitation will facilitate mutual understanding among all parties involved and illuminate both the vitality and the challenges of religious life in the United States,” the statement reads.

“We recognize that the Apostolic Visitation calls our sisters in the United States in particular to reflect on their recent history and present experience, their concerns and their hopes for the future of apostolic religious life in their country.”

“From our perspective as Board of Directors of the International Union of Superiors General, whose membership comprises nearly 2000 leaders of congregations of apostolic women religious, we affirm unequivocally our support for our sisters in the United States.”

The statement indicates that many union members are superiors general of their international congregations. “The diversity of religious life that exists in the church exists also within our

congregations. After decades of cross-cultural dialogue and searching together for God's will in general chapters, the unity of vision and purpose we now experience is indivisible.

Mindful that the mystery of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth celebrates the meeting of two women, who spoke joyfully, humbly, and confidently of the great things God had done in their lives and would do for others through their YES, we express our loving fidelity to the church and our solidarity with our sisters in the United States as the Apostolic Visitation begins. May the example of Mary and Elizabeth inspire our sisters in that country to share their story with confidence, humility, and joy.

The international union's statement is signed by all of its board of directors, including Dominican Sister Viviana Ballarin, (Spain); Notre Dame de Sion Sister Maureen Cusick, (Scotland); Sacred Hearts of Perpetual Adoration Sister Rosa Maria Ferreiro, (Spain); Religious of Mary Immaculate Sister Soledad Galerón, (Spain); Mercedarian Missionaries of Berriz Sister Amelia Kawaji, (Japan); Daughters of Wisdom Sister Louise Madore (Canada); Sisters of the Divine Savior Sister Therezinha Rasera (Brazil); Holy Union Sister Carol Regan (US); Franciscan Daughter of God Sister Carola Thomann (Germany); and Daughters of Mary and Joseph Sister Linda Webb (US); as well as by the union's executive secretary, Religious of the Sacred Heart Sister Victoria Gz de Castejón (Spain).

Fox is NCR editor and can be reached at tfox@ncronline.org

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