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U.S. women religious and loyalty oaths

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Religious communities of women have been responsible for many of the good things that the Catholic church in the United States has achieved, both before and after the Second Vatican Council.

It is all the more distressing, therefore, that two Vatican agencies -- the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith -- have targeted these communities and their principal leadership organization for a "visitation" and "doctrinal assessment" respectively.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the "visitation" is the requirement that each of the visitors will be required to make a public profession of faith and an oath of fidelity to the Apostolic See.

This requirement will discourage a number of potential visitors from volunteering their services in this study, and thereby skew the visitation teams in a particular ideological direction.

This will likely be the case because many women religious find the demand for loyalty oaths to be both redundant and demeaning, given the fact that Catholics profess their faith on a regular basis when they recite the Creed together at Mass on Sundays and major feasts.

To be sure, canon 833 of the revised Code of Canon Law imposes this requirement on various members of the church, such as newly appointed cardinals, bishops, seminary rectors, and seminary professors of theology and philosophy.

In early 1989, however, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published an updated Profession of Faith with three additional paragraphs, which many commentators have found to be highly problematical, particularly the last paragraph: "Moreover, I adhere with religious submission of will and intellect to the

teachings which either the Roman pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act."

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also imposed an "Oath of Fidelity on Assuming an Office to be Exercised in the Name of the church." This oath reads in part: "With Christian obedience I shall follow what the bishops, as authentic doctors and teachers of the faith, declare, or what they, as those who govern the church, establish."

As Fr. James Coriden, professor of canon law at Washington Theological Union, has pointed out, this change "required not just a personal act of faith, but also to firmly accept and hold certain nondefinitive teachings. This went way beyond a profession of faith."

It seemed at the time, Coriden remarked, "like an effort to deal with the issue of the ordination of women," which happens to be one of the three topics that is of doctrinal concern to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and that it wants to discuss with officers of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or LCWR. The leadership conference represents the leadership of 95 percent of U.S. communities of women religious.

Sr. Theresa Kane, a former head of the LCWR who famously addressed Pope John Paul II during his first pastoral visit to the United States in 1979, called the requirement "scandalous."

"We have made lifetime oaths," she pointed out. "They are called vows. Before God we have attempted to live our lives fully with gifts of a rich spiritual life, an effective ministry, and in community with other women religious. Such is fidelity and a fidelity that belongs only to one's loving God."

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The "visitation" of U.S. communities of women religious, to be conducted by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and the "doctrinal assessment" of the LCWR, to be done by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, fly in the face of the historical record.

Communities of women religious in the United States have, **in the words of a recent editorial in the *National Catholic Reporter***, "faithfully carried out the mandates of the Second Vatican Council to reexamine and adapt their original charisms in the light of current challenges," embracing "real change" and forging ahead "at great effort and cost, often when many bishops and pastors held back or opposed the renewal."

These communities also accepted the council's call for collegiality by shifting from a top-down to a consensus-style form of governance. And after the council, their members entered every type of pastoral ministry and theological scholarship and teaching, rising to positions of national leadership in each of them.

The *NCR* editorial concluded: "Thus, at a time when the American church as a whole has been hurt by scandal, financial crisis, a severe priest shortage, and, some say, a serious paralysis of hierarchical leadership, the sisters' story is worth telling and celebrating."

The Vatican should be doing just that rather than conducting a "visitation" and a "doctrinal assessment" of one of the church's greatest assets.

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