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Women religious study to include 'soundness of doctrine'

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 3, 2009

Mother Mary Clare Millea

The woman charged with carrying out the investigation of U.S. women religious congregations last week sent major superiors letters containing information that for the first time confirms the Vatican-sponsored effort will involve an examination of ?the soundness of doctrine held and taught? by the women.

When the study was first announced it was explained that it was intended to examine ?the quality of life? of U.S. women religious [1], with an eye to finding out why vocations have dropped over the years. Initially, some women religious expressed confusion and skepticism [2]concerning the purpose of the investigation. They questioned its intent.

Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the apostolic visitator charged by the Vatican with directing the study, sent a letter dated July 28 to the heads of women religious congregations, along with an *Instrumentum Laboris*, or ?working paper."

The paper outlined the next phases of the investigation, including the thrust of a questionnaire that the religious heads are to fill out and return to Millea. The paper also explained in greater detail the focus of the Apostolic Visitation.

Read Mother Mary Clare Millea's letter to the women religious congregation heads.[3]

Read the full text of the "*Instumentum Laboris* and appendices."[4]

Phase one of the study, which included interviews with the religious superiors, ended July 31. Phase two calls on the heads of the orders to fill out and return questionnaires relating to the life and operation of the orders. Phase three involves visitations to selected congregations.

The areas of concern identified in the questionnaire include identity; governance; vocation promotion; admission and formation policies; spiritual life and common life; mission and ministry; and finances.

The Vatican investigation was initiated last December by Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, who heads the Vatican?s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The working paper,

distributed by Millea, comes out of his congregation. It specifies that Millea will be responsible for transmitting a detailed and confidential report to the congregation upon completion of the study.

The working paper also said that information about the congregations will be sought from local bishops.

The paper states: ?The Apostolic Visitation will focus on the fundamentals of the religious vocation, including consecration by profession of the evangelical counsels through public vow within a particular religious institute wherein members exercise some external apostolic work(s). Particular attention will be given to the significant witness of the vowed commitment given by women religious within the heritage of each institute?s charism and in fidelity to the Church?s teachings and to the renewal indicated by Vatican Council II and post-conciliar documents. It will examine, for example, promotion and retention of vocations; initial and ongoing formation; the concrete living out of the evangelical counsels; common life and religious houses; the structures and practical application of internal governance; the soundness of doctrine held and taught by the religious; the nature and variety of apostolic works; and the overall administration of temporal goods.?

The Apostolic Visitation, the working paper explains, ?is intended as a constructive assessment and an expression of genuine concern for the quality of the life of all members of apostolic institutes of women religious in the United States whether or not these institutes are manifesting signs of new growth or may have experienced decline during the last several decades.?

?The Visitation hopes to identify the challenges women religious face and to promote and encourage fidelity, integrity and growth within religious life.?

The heads of the women?s orders will receive the questionnaires in September and will be asked to return them by Nov. 1.

During the second phase, all U.S. women religious are similarly being asked to reflect on the questions in the working paper that major superiors will answer. Order heads are being asked to provide a copy of the working paper to all U.S. women religious.

In her letter to the order heads, Millea wrote: "Although this Instrumentum Laboris is being distributed directly to you, the major superiors of the institutes in the United States, success of the Visitation itself will depend on the active participation of all women religious in our country. For this reason, I am asking each of you to make this enclosed document directly available to every sister of your institute."

The working paper stated that after careful analysis of the data received in the questionaires, a representative sample of religious institutes will be chosen for on-site visits. These will begin in early 2010.

Finally Millea, the paper states, will ?present a detailed and confidential report with recommendations to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.?

The paper also says that ?if any sister wishes to express her opinion about some aspect of her religious institute, she may do so freely and briefly, in writing and with signature, specifically identifying her institute by title and location. In order to respect each sister?s freedom of conscience, any sister may send her written comments directly and confidentially to Mother Mary Clare Millea at the Apostolic Visitation Office" in Hamden, Connecticut.

It states that the on-site visits will be conducted by a team consisting of vowed religious who have been appointed by Millea, with the approval of the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

All order heads have been asked to suggest names for possible visitors ?in accord with criteria communicated directly to them.? To be eligible to be on a visitation team, women religious must first sign fidelity oaths [5]to the Vatican and to their bishops.

The paper states that team visitors will speak individually with members of a religious community at the visitation site. ?In so far as possible, every member of the community at a site visited will at least meet and greet one of the visitors during the on-site visit. Sisters who do not reside at the site who request to speak with a Visitor shall be permitted and welcomed to do so at the site visited.?

Dealing with the cost of the visitation, the paper states that ach religious institute or center chosen for an on-site visit will be asked to
provide hospitality for the visitors and assistants "and, if at all possible, transportation costs related to the visit."

The paper says that all visitors will be bound by strict confidentiality. ?No Visitor will express any judgment either in writing or orally to the major superior or any other member of the religious institute visited either prior to or during or after the Visit. The Visitation Team will together prepare a specific and detailed report to be given directly to Mother Mary Clare Millea.?

Catholic News Service interviewed Millea last week and asked her who would be paying for the visitations. CNS reported that she declined to discuss specifics related to the study's cost, including how it is being financed. Millea told CNS that U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is not funding the effort.

"Anyone who has contributed has not wanted their name to be publicized," she said. "The (Vatican) congregation is conducting the visitation so they're ultimately responsible for financing it," she explained. "We have a project that is going to last three years. We are welcoming the support of individual dioceses, individuals or groups who would be willing to help defray the expenses."

The 341 religious institutes of women in the United States contain approximately 59,000 women religious. Communities of cloistered, contemplative nuns are not officially part of the study.

Meanwhile, the Vatican has opened a second investigation [6] into the umbrella leadership organization of the U.S. women religious, the Leadership Council of Women Religious. The leadership council meets next week in New Orleans for its annual gathering.

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