

Under fire, women religious leaders gather in New Orleans

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 12, 2009



Incoming LCWR president, Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Marlene Weisenbeck

New Orleans

Facing two Vatican investigations, some 800 women religious leaders from throughout the country have gathered here to discuss their congregations' uncertain futures.

Many women, in informal conversations, spoke of their determination not to let these Vatican actions get in the way of their ministries and religious life, hammered out over decades, both through experience and through exchanges with Rome on congregational constitutions.

As if to underscore their concern for their ongoing apostolic missions, the women, at the outset of the three-day assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the umbrella organization for 95 percent of the women religious of America, toured several sites in this struggling city where women religious were working in a variety of social ministries.

The women filled six buses and spent a half day viewing their sister congregations' works, offering personal encouragement.

"There are simply too many things going on in religious life to get derailed," said past president of the leadership conference, Sister of Saint Francis Nancy Schreck, shortly before the buses left a downtown hotel.

At the 2006 leadership conference assembly members called for an effort to assist the women religious of New Orleans who were then responding to the previous year's hurricane. As part of that response, the conference established the New Orleans Recovery Project.

Working with the Washington-based fund raising group, Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, FADICA, the women religious, under the direction of Sister of Notre Dame Suzanne Hall, raised more than \$7 million. The money is being used to fund schools, senior citizen centers, nursing homes, early childhood learning centers and a variety of other social programs.

Nevertheless, despite the stated focus on ministry, it was also clear that the Vatican investigations are very much

on the minds of the women here. Some said they are bewildered as to why they would be the focus of ecclesial concern now, especially when many clergy have come under fire for clergy sex abuse.

Some expressed resentment. "This is the year of the priest and they are investigating women religious," one woman said sharply.

Some expressed sadness and disappointment. Still others said that a self-evaluation, albeit forced, can be a good and useful thing.

The first Vatican investigation was announced last December by Cardinal Franc Rodé, who heads the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. This study is aimed at U.S. women religious congregations.

The second Vatican investigation was announced in February by Cardinal William Joseph Levada, prefect of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Its stated purpose is to obtain a "doctrinal assessment" of the women's leadership conference itself.

NCR interviewed more than two dozen women religious. Reactions to the investigations varied in tone and content. Most women expressed confidence that they would handle these matters thoughtfully. They also agreed the time together here will be most useful as it will provide opportunities to listen to each other and better discern the road ahead.

"We are being called to deeper reflection," said incoming conference president, Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Marlene Weisenbeck. "It is important to stand on our own integrity as we go ahead."

A number of women said their knowledge of the nature, scope and the reasons behind the Vatican actions is still sketchy.

Levada informed leadership conference executives in his February letter that his congregation's doctrinal concerns date back to a 2001 meeting with the women leaders. He wrote them that his congregation had asked the women to report on initiatives "taken or planned" to promote three areas of doctrinal concern - ordination, the primacy of the Catholic church and homosexuality. He said that since then the women had failed to adequately respond.

The letter has confused some of the religious leaders here. Several women in executive leadership positions told *NCR* that the leadership conference executive team has visited the Vatican each year since 2001 and no one there had raised those three specific concerns.

Sister of Saint Joseph Mary Dacey, past president of the leadership conference, on the leadership team from 2005 through 2008, said: "We went every year for dialogue and to express matters of concern. We were there every year. They didn't raise those issues in any way, shape or form."

Several women said the leadership conference prizes dialogue and has tried to make itself available for communication. As an example, they said they travel to Rome on their own initiative each year to be available to meet with Vatican officials. It is the only women's religious organization worldwide, they said, that takes this step.

One woman said that cultural differences seem to be at play here. She said the Vatican prizes clear top down authority structures while the women prefer collective leadership. She said that fluidity of the women's conference's executive team, comprised of pre-, current and post-presidents with each president serving a one year term, might have added to the confusion.

Another past conference president, Sister of Mercy Camille D'Arienzo, emphasizing she was speaking for herself, talked of her pain and disappointment.

"They [the Vatican] should be awarding medals to these women, not investigating them. What's going on is very painful and disrespectful because women religious have been so loyal to the church. I feel sorry for all the women who are now placed under suspicion. I know my sisters and they deserve better."

Becoming philosophical, she added, "I came to religious life not to please an institution. I came to follow Jesus. Christ suffered. This pain gives us a particular connection."

Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Mary Daniel Turner, long respected for her scholarship and thoughtful perspectives on religious life, said tensions between the Vatican and the women religious of America date back at least to the 1950s "when we [the congregations] began to see we shared a common vision. "At the heart it is hard for Rome to understand us as moral agents in our own right."

She added that the issues behind the Vatican investigations "are wider than women religious. The issues are those of the whole church. I hate to see this reduced to just religious life. It is deeper than that. It is a difference between the church of Rome and the U.S. church. I think we, the women religious, are asking what the laity is also asking. "Who are we as Catholics in a pluralistic society?" "

Another past conference president, Sister of Mercy Doris Gottemoeller, speaking to the process of the investigation of the women's congregations, called for transparency.

As outlined to the women by the Vatican, the final result of the investigation of the congregations will be put together by the Vatican appointed Apostolic Visitor, Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sister Mother Mary Clare Millea.

Her report will be secret and will not be shared with the U.S. women religious. The reports made by visitation teams to various congregations, a phase of the investigation, are also to be secret and not shared with the individual congregations.

This particularly disturbs the women. Virtually all those who spoke with NCR called for transparency. Some said it would be a minimal requirement for active participation.

"We are used to evaluations. We have no problem with evaluations," said Blessed Virgin Mary Sister Helen Garvey. "But we need a sense of fair play. There needs to be transparency."

At the same time, women who have spoken with Millea and have been interviewed by her, to the last person, have given her high marks for hospitality and cordial nature. "She seems to have been an inspired choice," said Gottemoeller.

Gottemoeller said that the investigation can also be a positive thing. "The church has a right for accountability. If we assume the attitude we have not made any mistakes in the process of renewal we would be laughed out of the church."

Then, reflecting the uncertainty of the moment, she concluded: "Something will emerge that we cannot predict."

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