

Cokie Roberts tells sisters: Be proud

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Cokie Roberts (2006 CNS file photo)

NEW ORLEANS

Facing an apostolic visitation by the Vatican, women religious in the U.S. should point proudly to their history of service in schools, hospitals and other ministries as signs of their vibrant "quality of life," broadcaster Cokie Roberts said Aug. 12.

The news analyst for National Public Radio and political commentator for ABC News was a keynote speaker during the Aug. 11-14 gathering of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in New Orleans.

"Point to your works," said Roberts, who was educated in elementary school and high school by the Religious of the Sacred Heart in New Orleans and Washington. She is the daughter of Lindy Boggs, former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican.

During LCWR's four-day meeting, representatives of religious communities discussed the Vatican's upcoming apostolic visitation and a separate "doctrinal assessment" of the LCWR authorized by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

They also had a session on a new study on vocations conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a research center based at Georgetown University in Washington, on behalf of the National Religious Vocation Conference, based in Chicago.

There was a presentation on an initiative by the LCWR and Catholic donors that funded more than \$7 million in repair projects benefiting eight religious communities in the Archdiocese of New Orleans whose schools and institutions suffered extensive damage from Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In her keynote address, Roberts said the vitality of women religious extends beyond their numbers and can best be seen in the lasting effects they have had on students and others they are serving.

Women who have been educated by sisters in Catholic schools may not have entered religious life but have become church and community leaders, she said.

"The official number of women religious in this country might have fallen, but I feel it is safe to say that the number of religious women who are acting out of their faith to serve society is higher than ever before," Roberts said.

"You wonderful, holy, awe-inspiring women -- you women of spirit -- have taught us well. Your teaching will go on, constantly creating a better world for the people of God, corralling the chaos to create a better quality of life for others that you can be proud of."

About 1,000 women religious were scheduled to discuss in private both the apostolic visitation of all U.S. women religious and the doctrinal assessment by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"Obviously, there's a lot of concern among the people here," Roberts told the *Clarion Herald*, newspaper of the New Orleans Archdiocese.

"The document that the Vatican has sent out says that the visitation is aimed at looking at the quality of life of women religious in the United States. I think one measurement of that quality of life is the quality of lives they have affected," she said after her address.

"Every day they benefit thousands of lives in this country, whether it's through schools or through hospitals or through missions with the elderly, the poor or the prisons -- all of the things where they basically are taking the words of Jesus and acting on them."

Roberts said the nuns she spoke with at the conference did not really understand why the Vatican had requested the apostolic visitation, which is being directed by Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

"Puzzlement is the word," Roberts said. "Here they are, all day, every day, trying to serve the people of God, and suddenly they feel like they're under investigation. Sure, there's concern."

Communities of women religious have been asked to complete a comprehensive questionnaire that examines several areas of religious life: identity, governance, vocation promotion, admission and formation policies, spiritual life and common life, mission and ministry, and finances.

The topics were outlined in a working document distributed July 28 to the 341 leaders of the religious congregations. Members of the orders are being asked to reflect on the working document. A separate questionnaire based on the working document will be distributed to superiors general Sept. 1.

The superiors will have until Nov. 1 to complete the questionnaire and return it to the apostolic visitation office in Hamden, Conn. Once the office has all the questionnaires, a decision will be made on which communities will be visited.

The apostolic visits are scheduled to begin in January and continue throughout 2010.

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