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U.S. Nuns and the Vatican

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

I was interviewed for the weekend Religion and Ethics show on National Public Television. For those following this story of the Vatican investigations of U.S. women religious communities and their leadership -- or not -- here is the transcript of the interview. To see the broadcast click here.

DEBORAH POTTER, guest anchor: An association of Catholic women religious leaders is asking the Vatican why the group is being investigated. The leadership conference that represents almost all of the Catholic religious orders in the United States is the target of a "doctrinal assessment," the results of which will be a secret report to Rome. The group was warned eight years ago that it had failed to promote some of the church's teachings, including the male-only priesthood. A separate "apostolic visitation" is looking into what the Vatican calls "the quality of the life" of all 60,000 American Catholic sisters.

Joining us now to discuss these investigations is Tom Fox, editor of the independent newspaper the National Catholic Reporter. Thanks for joining us.

TOM FOX (Editor, National Catholic Reporter): Great to be here.

POTTER: Tom, I wonder if you could tell us what appears to be behind these investigations or, maybe put another way, what does it seem that the Vatican is after?

MR. FOX: Well, the truth is that no one really knows, and that's one of the disconcerting elements. This really has taken the women by surprise. They met, as you said, with the Vatican eight years ago and went over certain matters, and every year since then they've been returning to Rome talking to Vatican officials, been open for communication, and now, out of seemingly nowhere, comes these investigations.

POTTER: Why do you think it might be happening now? Has there been some kind of change in the

make-up of religious orders, or is it just changing philosophies in Rome that might be pushing this forward?

MR. FOX: Well, there's been a conflict going back 40 years, since the Second Vatican Council, between two models of church. One is the more conservative, traditional model, male-clergy-hierarchical model, and the second has been the model of the Second Vatican Council, which stressed collegiality, and the women religious of America really embraced that, and they changed their constitutions to become more collective in their own leadership. And they really represent the forefront of this second model of church. And I think today the older, more conservative model feels that it's strong enough now, maybe, to rein in this last remnant of the Second Vatican Council.

POTTER: So is it in effect a sort of push to reestablish a kind of orthodoxy in the Catholic Church in America?

MR. FOX: I think that there's a continued concern by the Vatican that American Catholics are not orthodox enough, that the women religious may not be orthodox, but let's be clear this that this is not on traditional teachings on God, Trinity, Jesus. This is these are teachings on homosexuality, on the male priesthood, and the primacy of the Catholic Church.

POTTER: And yet that seems pretty central to what concerns the Vatican.

MR. FOX: That's a very central concern, at this point, to the Vatican.

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POTTER: So what, then, are the wider implications of an investigation into the women religious for the Catholic Church in America?

MR. FOX: Right. That's a good question, and I think women religious say that this really represents an investigation or an attack, if you will, on the American way of being church, which really has stressed more lay involvement, more religious involvement, collegiality, more accountability of demanded of the bishops, and so we're really seeing here maybe the clash of two models, and I think the women religious are right that this really is wider than just the women religious themselves.

POTTER: Now, there have been some discussions that perhaps what the Vatican's really doing is sort of assessing property for its value. Does that have any bearing, do you think, any validity?

MR. FOX: Well, again, Deborah, the fact is that no one really knows, and so you end up in this speculation, and of course there have been millions of dollars in lawsuits against the Church, and the Church is hurting for money, and so some of the women are at least speculating that Rome wants a better assessment of their property values and with an eye on maybe using some of that money to pay some of these bills.

POTTER: Obviously, we'll be watching this and report the results when we can get them. Tom, I appreciate you being here. Tom Fox from the National Catholic Reporter.

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