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## U.S. women religious supported by sister sisters in Asia

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

### Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

I've traveled through 12 time zones since Oct. 11 when I left NCR's home base in Kansas City, Missouri. Without exaggeration, I think I am allowed to say I have come to "the other side" of the world. Meanwhile, I am focused on women religious in today's church and I am here, at a conference of Asian and Oceania women religious leaders to do interviews and gather information about their work and challenges.

While it is too early to draw conclusions about anything substantive about these women, it is not too early to offer initial impressions. I am the only journalist and one of only two men — the other is an Asian Jesuit — here for the nine days of the AMOR XV gathering. We are gathered at a diocesan conference center 30 miles outside of Bangkok.



What follows is a first impression: I've been surprised at the intensity

of interest and informed impressions among the women here regarding the two investigations of U.S. women religious. These women follow developments in the states, by internet, and they seem not at all pleased.

A second impression is coupled with the first. These women, like their sister sisters in the United States, have in recent years been increasingly moving out of the safe havens of traditional religious communities to live closer to the needy they feel called to serve. These are socially informed and justice oriented women, not fitting some misinformed notions attributed to them.

Yes, they almost all wear habits, as culturally acceptable and useful dress, as do some progressive-minded Western women religious. But in Asia traditional garb appears to be as much an instrument of useful liberation as a sign of traditional status.

So far this gathering is focused on religious responses to the dehumanizing injustices suffered by the countless millions who live on one or two dollars a day and whose lives have been turned upside down by globalization and ever increasing inequities.

This helps me understand some conversations here. There is a sense here of solidarity with U.S, women religious and their current plight. Both have taken the same path. The women here are bright and committed to the gospel journey. They seem to acknowledge little is conventional about the path they have chosen.

Meanwhile, the organization they have come here under, AMOR, is loosely fit, flexibly, pastoral by nature, and is interested in communication and values its openness. It's an organization started by women and does not fall under the direct authority of any Roman congregation. You get the drift.

You cannot be here without recognizing the emergence of a worldwide women religious network, or at least its early birthing, formed by shared experiences and acts of injustice, often at the hands of men, and, sadly, sometimes at the hands of clerics.

Back to the investigations: 'investigations' is the word they use.

A notion I have, fortified by impressions here, is the clerics who began these investigations, as yet, have little clue what they have gotten themselves into -- and what the long term repercussions for religious life and the church are likely to be.

Women here shake their heads as they talk about the closed, secret procession of the investigations and the fear among men this reveals vividly.

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The world shares rich and wonderful cultures and they are on display here, as over two dozen nations are represented. At the same time we share on planet and operate within an explosive global communications network. Women are connected as never before. They are increasingly informed and empowered to be their own agents of change. These new information networks are counter hierarchical, and subversive to rigid structure. Watch out.

As one woman religious asked me yesterday: 'Do our bishops have any idea what they've started?'

Half way around the world, the depth and width of an apparent quagmire some clerics have entered seems deeper and wider than they have yet to imagine.

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