

Stonehill symposium played role in women religious study

Thomas C. Fox | Nov. 4, 2009



CNS photo

Speaking publicly for the first time about the apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious communities his congregation is conducting, Cardinal Franc Rodé said that he requested the three-year study to help the sisters and to respond to concerns for their welfare.

"This apostolic visitation hopes to encourage vocations and assure a better future for women religious," Rodé said in a statement released by the Vatican Nov. 3.

He told Vatican Radio Nov. 4 that some media presented the visitation "as if it were an act of mistrust of American female religious congregations or as if it were a global criticism of their work. It is not," Catholic News Service reported.

In the radio interview, Rodé said the investigation was a response to concerns, including by "an important representative of the U.S. church" regarding "some irregularities or omissions in American religious life. Most of all, you could say, it involves a certain secular mentality that has spread in these religious families and, perhaps, also a certain 'feminist' spirit."

The women religious study was first announced last January in Washington, but until last week the prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life had remained silent. His statement was issued, he said, in response to "many news accounts" and inquiries about the visitation.

NCR had sent the cardinal a series of questions concerning the visitation. His congregation responded to *NCR* Oct. 31 that Rodé had decided to issue a statement rather than answer *NCR*'s specific questions, one of which asked if a symposium that the cardinal had attended at Stonehill College in Easton, Mass., in September 2008 had influenced his decision to begin the apostolic investigation.

In his statement, Rodé said the apostolic visitation is a response to "concerns expressed by American Catholics — religious, laity, clergy and hierarchy — about the welfare of religious women and consecrated life in general."

He said his office had been considering convoking an apostolic visitation when he traveled to the United States for the symposium on religious life at Stonehill College.

?The multitude and complexity? of the problems and challenges facing U.S. religious were made clear by speakers at the symposium, the cardinal explained in his statement. ?This helped me understand that such an evaluation of the challenges facing individual religious and their congregations would benefit the church at large as well as the sisters and institutes involved.?

Rodé said that he hopes the visitation not only will give the Vatican an accurate and thorough picture of the life of U.S. women religious, but that it also would be ?a realistic and graced opportunity for personal and community introspection as major superiors and sisters cooperate in this study.?

He said the information culled from ?the standard, objective data? regarding membership, living arrangements, governance and ministries of the members of the religious orders would be made public ?and should provide important information regarding the likely future trends of religious life in the United States.?

Beyond that, he said, his congregation ?will formulate no conclusions or plan of action, if any, until the final report of the visitor has been evaluated.?

The Stonehill College symposium was part of the 200th anniversary celebration of the Boston archdiocese. Initially planned to draw 250 people, it eventually gathered more than 600 for daylong activities that highlighted talks on religious life, many of them sharply critical of much of women religious life in the United States today.

Rodé, who offered one of the keynote addresses, left the gathering seemingly moved by what he heard, according to at least one press account. He was quoted as saying that while ?we are all in research? and while he had not yet concluded what he would report to the pope, ?we all want something better for religious life.?

The Stonehill symposium was sponsored by the college and the Fall River diocese. It took place Sept. 27, 2008, less than two months before Rodé had a Nov. 17 audience with Pope Benedict XVI, at which the prefect said he received the authority to conduct the apostolic visitation.

The symposium was titled: ?Apostolic Religious Life Since Vatican II ? Reclaiming the Treasure: Bishops, Theologians, and Religious in Conversation.? Participants have described it as a frank, if not sometimes painful, discussion of contemporary religious life.

The following has been culled from [speakers? manuscripts](#) [1] and press reports, including an account on the Stonehill College Web site.

[In his address](#), [2] Rodé praised the ?numerous contributions from consecrated men and women? through U.S. history, but added that despite these efforts the church is facing ?one of her greatest crises of all time? as the number of religious vocations has declined precipitously in Western cultures.

He placed the blame at the doorstep of a misguided hermeneutics ? or interpretation ? of documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), describing this interpretation as ?a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture? based upon ?a false concept of the church and hence of the council, as if the former were from man alone and the latter a sort of constituent assembly.?

?The hermeneutics of rupture has dominated the attempts at renewal of religious life,? he said, explaining that under the mantle of renewal any change that occurred was more an ?adaptation to the changed conditions of our time? rather than working toward changing the world to adapt to Gospel values.

He said changes that evolved ?supposed the radical centering of man on himself, the rejection of the supernatural and operated in a climate of radical subjectivism.?

Missionary Servant of the Most Blessed Trinity [Sr. Sara Butler, a member of the International Theological Commission and professor of Dogmatic Theology at St. Joseph's Seminary \(Dunwoodie\)](#), told the audience [3] that increasingly progressive leadership of religious orders threatens the Catholic character of the orders and is polarizing those in religious life. She said this is occurring despite the fact that the vast majority of consecrated religious are not progressive or even in progressive orders.

“The problem is not only that so few are joining our ranks,” Butler said. “It is that the current polarization and division in the church at large is found among us as well. It exists in the uneasy and even fractured relationships among our apostolic institutes, within many of our institutes, and “for many “in the relationships of religious with the diocesan clergy, the bishops and the Holy See.”

Butler said that the “reality of this polarization is more than regrettable; it is a cause of scandal and continues abetted by bishops unwilling to confront progressive religious.”

Part of the problem was timing, she said. The 1960s and 1970s were the worst times to initiate religious reforms, given the turmoil and strife that marked those decades. This was especially true considering Vatican II’s emphasis on the apostolic at the expense of the monastic, she said.

Because much of the apostolic impulse was expressed through participation in social justice crusades, after religious had finished fighting for civil rights or for an end to the Vietnam War, they turned the tactics and revolutionary fervor toward perceived injustices inside the church, she said.

Another aspect of the problem, she said, was that church leaders underestimated the strength of radical feminism in the United States. This strain of feminism is no longer a part of the conversation in civil society, but it remains ascendant within religious communities, she said.

Sr. Gill Goulding, a member of the Congregation of Jesus and a professor at Regis College in Toronto, stressed that the love of Christ is “the root, ground, heart of religious life.” She encouraged religious to follow obedience out of love, not fear, and to reclaim the contemplative way in prayer and practice.

Jesuit Fr. Joseph Lienhard, professor of theology at Fordham University in Bronx, N.Y., focused on the importance of signs and symbols in religious life, such as common dress and communal living, saying that to the detriment of religious orders, these signs, including traditional habits, have been largely abandoned since the 1960s.

Dominican Sr. Elizabeth McDonough, professor of canon law and theology at Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, told the gathering that Vatican II took place in a decade of assassinations, war protests, equal rights, and the feminist movement. The hierarchy greatly underestimated the impact of the times and the extent of renewal in religious communities, she said, and adopted a principle of not intervening, which meant that crucial oversight was absent.

[Ann Carey](#), [4] a writer and contributor to *Our Sunday Visitor*, said that lay Catholics expect religious men and women to reflect the teachings of the church, yet some religious today do not accept teachings on several issues.

“In the public square, families have been battling the assault against traditional Judeo-Christian values regarding sexuality, marriage and human life,” Carey said. “And now in the church we are witnessing vowed religious who not only are accepting, but are promoting that same agenda and showing no deference to church teachings on many issues like homosexuality, contraception and abortion.”

One reason for the lack of new vocations, she said, is that religious life does not seem very different from the

lay life, and young people are not attracted to religious orders that do not know what they are about and where they are going.

The symposium's [final words](#) [5] were left to Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wis., who said that Catholics must now "unlearn" the language that followed Vatican II, especially as it pertains to obedience and conscience.

Emphasizing that obedience must once again become the basis for all religious life, he blamed a widespread misunderstanding of the role of conscience "and tolerance by church authorities to allow this misunderstanding to continue" as the primary errors in Catholic life since Vatican II.

"What you've been talking about all day, sentiments with which I strongly agree, is the language that was learned about the church and about religious life since Vatican II. But the language that many people have learned "it is clear from today that most of you resisted learning it" and I resisted learning it; but the language that many people have learned is the language of the discontinuity hermeneutic, the language of the rupture, between pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II."

Morlino told his receptive audience that "the word used to concretize the love of Jesus Christ on the cross is obedience." He said that "obedience is everything" and yet, in the years that followed the council, "obedience was reduced, it was redefined, and it was spun as autonomy, autonomy justified by following my conscience." He traced this error to the 1968 papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which, he said, led to the deconstruction of the word conscience.

"It's not that artificial contraception is at the root of every other problem "it's that artificial contraception caused the deconstruction of the word conscience on a widespread level among Catholics."

The Stonehill symposium, according to the college's Web site, was funded through donations from Our Sunday Visitor and the Little Sisters of the Poor.

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