

Controversial questions stricken from religious study

Thomas C. Fox | Nov. 10, 2009



Mother Mary Clare Millea

U.S. women religious superiors will no longer have to supply to the Vatican some of the most controversial information it had requested as part of a three-year study of religious congregations.

Information no longer being requested as part of the Vatican Apostolic Visitation, which began last January, includes the properties owned by the congregations, their most recent financial audits, ages of the sisters, and the ministries they are involved in.

Word of the change in procedures came in a letter dated Nov. 5 sent to the women religious superiors by Apostolic Visitor Mother Mary Clare Millea.

NCR obtained a copy of the letter.

Millea explained in her letter why she had dropped the request for the information.

“Many major superiors have already addressed concerns to the Apostolic Visitation Office regarding confidentiality and protection of privileged information about their congregation, the sisters themselves and their apostolate. Although our canonical and civil advisors concur that the Apostolic See has the right to all the information contained in the questionnaire, in response to your legitimate questions, I have determined that documents number 5, 6, 7, requested in Part C of the questionnaire, are not to be submitted to the Apostolic Visitation Office as part of this visitation.”

She added that her office will return to congregation heads information already gathered regarding these subject matters.

“This change in design of the questionnaire,” Millea wrote, “was made after listening to your concerns and after considerable prayer and counsel. I have every confidence that the purpose of this phase of the Apostolic Visitation can be satisfactorily achieved with the data in Parts A, B and the first four documents listed in Part C of the questionnaire.”

The Apostolic Visitation office sent questionnaires to congregation head on Sept. 18 with instructions that the information be completed and returned to the office, located in Hamden, Conn. by Nov. 20.

Millea stated documents "not to be sent" to the Apostolic Visitation Office include:

5. A list of each sister, year of birth, address and type of ministry (full time/part time)
6. A list of properties owned and/or (co)sponsored by your unit.
7. A complete copy of the most recent independent audit of your religious unit or your last internal financial statement if an external audit has not been made. This should include a statement of financial position, statement of activity, statement of changes in net assets and statement of cash flows.?

In her letter, Millea assured the women religious leaders that the information she gathers as part of the study will be treated confidentially.

?All data gathered through Parts A, B, and C of the Questionnaire, through individual correspondence, and site visits where indicated, will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used to prepare the comprehensive report mandated by the Apostolic See. The data you send will be held in a secure place and, when no longer needed, will be returned to you or destroyed.?

Part A of the questionnaire attempts to gather objective information regarding women religious orders. The questions have been prepared with the help of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. An analytical report is expected to come out of these responses and it will be made public, ?but will not reveal the identity of the individual institutes. It will provide a broad overview of the present reality and likely future trends of religious life in the United States.?

Part B involves some 60 subjective questions regarding vocations, governance, financial, liturgical and spiritual life within the congregations. For example, questions include the following:

- How often is the Eucharist celebrated in primary houses of the unit whether a motherhouse, formation house, retirement facility, skilled-care facility, etc.?
- Do your sisters participate in the Eucharistic liturgy according to approved liturgical norms?
- At community gatherings/celebrations (such as chapters or jubilees, etc.), is Eucharist part of the gathering/celebration? Do rituals replace celebrations of the church?s liturgy?
- Do sisters offer reflections in place of homilies by a priest (or deacon) at congregational or other Eucharistic liturgies?
- When priests attend community gatherings and celebrations, are they encouraged to concelebrate Mass?
- How does the manner of dress of your sisters, as specified in the proper law of your religious institute, bear witness to your consecration, and to the dignity and simplicity of your vocation?
- How do you, as major superior, ensure the faithful living of the vow of poverty which obliges each religious to limitation and dependence in the use of material goods?
- What procedures are in place for the effective sharing of goods within your unit (e.g. regarding budgets)?
- What is the procedure for the use and accountability of income (salaries, stipends, gifts, donations)

received by the sisters?

- In what ways and how frequently are sisters who have personal patrimony permitted to use this for themselves?

From the beginning, some of the questions in Part C have caused the greatest concern among women religious, including congregation heads, who have felt the Vatican was violating privacy rights of the sisters in requesting the information. The most controversial of these have now been eliminated.

In her letter to the religious superiors, Millea thanked them for their continued cooperation and reiterated the purpose of the Apostolic Visitation, which will include site visitations to a yet undetermined number of congregations. She wrote:

“As Cardinal [Franc] Rode, [head of the Vatican office overseeing religious orders], recently stated, “this Apostolic Visitation hopes to encourage vocations and assure a better future for women religious.” It offers us a valuable opportunity for prayerful and thoughtful self-examination to discern whether or not those conditions exist which foster avenues of growth and vitality in our congregations.”

A copy of the letter is [here](#) [1].

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