

Women religious not complying with Vatican study

Thomas C. Fox | Nov. 24, 2009



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The vast majority of U.S. women religious are not complying with a Vatican request to answer questions in a document of inquiry that is part of a three-year study of the congregations. Leaders of congregations, instead, are leaving questions unanswered or sending in letters or copies of their communities' constitutions.

"There's been almost universal resistance," said one women religious familiar with the responses compiled by the congregation leaders. "We are saying 'enough!' In my 40 years in religious life I have never seen such unanimity."

The deadline for the questionnaires to be filled out and returned to the Vatican-appointed apostolic visitor, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mother Mary Clare Millea, was Nov. 20. On that day, according to an informed source, congregation leaders across the nation sent Millea letters and, in many cases, only partial answers to the questionnaire. Many women, instead of filling out the forms, replied by sending in copies of their Vatican -approved orders' religious constitutions. A religious order's constitution states its rationale, purpose and mission.

The Vatican initiated the study in January, saying its purpose is to determine the quality of life in religious communities, given the decline in vocations in recent decades. From the outset, the women have complained they were never consulted before Vatican officials announced the investigation and there is no transparency in the process. Some have called the effort demeaning and intrusive.

The decisions by congregation leaders not to comply follow nearly two months of intensive discussions both inside and across religious congregations. They follow consultations with civil and canon lawyers, and come in the wake of what some women religious see as widespread support by laity for their church missions.

With about half of the responses from the nation's 59,000 women religious accounted for, only about one percent answered, as directed, most or all of the questions contained in the study's working paper, officially called an *Instrumentum Laboris*, according to one informed source.

By contrast, according to the source, congregations representing, by far, the greater majority of women religious

decided not to comply and answered only a few, or none, of the questions. Many of the 340 U.S. apostolic congregation heads instead sent letters to Millea stating that what they were sending was what the Vatican was looking for.

"Cover letters [to Millea] have been respectful and kind," one woman, familiar with the responses, told NCR. "Many of the letters have essentially said that what we have to say about ourselves has already been said in our religious constitutions."

The Vatican questionnaire is divided into three parts. [Part A \[1\]](#) attempts to collect quantifiable information about such things as membership, numbers, living arrangements, health, and retirement conditions. [Part B \[2\]](#) and Part C ([bottom of Part B \[2\]](#)) aim to gather detailed information about community governance practices, vocation efforts, spiritual and liturgical practices, ministry and finances.

Earlier in the month, apparently after many complaints from women religious, the Vatican withdrew several questions from Part C, involving the individual ages of the women, assets belonging to the congregations, and recent financial statements.

NCR contacted more than a dozen women religious familiar with the responses. Almost no one would allow her name to be used, citing fear of reprisal against their congregations and the desire to have the apostolic visitor receive their letters before word of the actions became public.

While declining to be identified, one woman said: "What I can say quite clearly is that every leader that I know is trying to answer the survey with integrity. How that integrity works out in each case is up to the wisdom of each leader and her council."

"This was a grassroots response," said another woman religious. "It was not organized. It came out of a widespread sense that the Vatican action was an unjust affront to women religious."

Explaining the attitude in her community, St. Joseph Sr. Margaret Gregg said, "I feel the response was a thoughtful, respectful response to a very puzzling situation. The purpose of this investigation is unclear to me, given the level of the questions. I have always been proud of our community and the many women who serve God's people. The first sentence of our letter [to Millea] says it all, 'As apostolic women religious, we are faithful to the call of the Gospel and to our respective charisms.' "

The Vatican study is being carried out by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The action was initiated by the congregation's prefect, Cardinal Franc Rodé, who received authority for it from Pope Benedict late last year. It is being conducted under the direction of Millea, a Connecticut native, who heads the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, an international religious institute headquartered in Rome.

Phase one of the Vatican study involved interviews Millea had with congregation heads. Millea, a number of women religious leaders have said, has always been professional and cordial in carrying out her work as apostolic visitor. Phase two of the study involves the answering of the questionnaires. Phase three of the study calls for individual on site visits by teams of religious, appointed by Millea, to yet to be announced congregations. These are set to begin next spring.

Phase four calls for Millea to comb the information and make recommendations to the Vatican for further action.

The Vatican has placed the cost of the study at \$1.1 million and has asked U.S. bishops to help raise the money.

Several women religious said that, in discerning their responses to the questionnaire which they felt were intrusive, there emerged a new sense of identity and resolve. One said that for years women religious have

focused on the needs of others. This time they had to focus on themselves.

She said women religious have been virtually unanimous in spirit that they have been living out their missions, as directed by the gospels and by the Second Vatican Council, which called upon religious communities to go out in the world to work among the poor and to build more just and peaceful structures.

She explained that in the process church prelates lost the control over women religious congregations they once had. She said many women religious believe the investigation is part of an effort to regain that control.

"Vatican II took us out of the ghettos and into ecology, feminism and justice in the world," she said. "The Vatican still has a difficult time accepting that."

Some of the women interviewed by NCR cite an irony involved in the investigation. One said that it is "unlikely the Vatican wanted us to come out of this being more confident of our identity as self-defining religious agents, but that is exactly what has happened."

Another said: "At first, many women were asking, 'How do we respond? Then we were asking, 'How do we respond faithfully in keeping with our identity?' And soon we were asking, 'What is that identity?' "

Still another said that at first when confronted with the questionnaire, many women religious congregation heads felt isolated. But after discussions within their communities and after regional meetings with other women religious and after consultations with their canon lawyers, they overcame the initial sense of isolation and grew in common resolve.

Several women said canon lawyers told the women they were not required to answer all the questions. Religious, unlike bishops, priests and deacons, who make up the clergy, are not officially part of the church's hierarchical structure. According to this reasoning, women religious are responsible to their congregation leadership and to their constitutions.

NCR contacted several canon lawyers consulted by women religious communities. These canon lawyers declined to be interviewed for this story.

All along, said one woman religious, the challenge has been to respond to the Vatican in a way that breaks a cycle of violence. She said that the women religious communities have attempted to respond by using a language "devoid of the violence" they found in the Vatican questionnaire and within the wider study. She characterized the congregation responses as "creative and affirming," and part of an effort to set a positive example in "nonviolent resistance."

"On the one hand we didn't want to roll over and play dead," she said. "So the question was, 'How do you step outside a violent framework and do something new?' That was the challenge that emerged." One congregation, she said, cited a U.S. bishops' statement concerning domestic abuse in its response letter to Millea. "The point is, there have to be more than two choices: Take the abuse and offer it up, or kill the abuser."

Women religious, she said, are asking if there is a "Ghandian or Martin Luther King way" to deal with violence they felt is being done to them.

At issue, according to several women religious, is the role women religious are to play in the world today. As much as any other element in the church, women religious claim Vatican II's documents as a call go out in the world, loved and blessed by God, and to serve within it.

During the pontificates of Pope John Paul II and Benedict the XVI the hierarchy, many church observers say,

has pulled back from these directives, seeing the world as a more hostile environment. They view the church as a bastion of light and love within this world and want the women religious to work more directly from within church structures.

For example, Rodé told *NCR* senior correspondent John Allen last month that he believes that Vatican II, while designed to generate a moderate reform, instead triggered "the greatest crisis in church history."

"In the 16th century, during the Reformation, many religious left the church and many convents were closed, but it was geographically limited, more or less to Northern Europe," he said. "In the French Revolution, there was another catastrophe, but it was limited to France. The crisis after the Second Vatican Council, however, was the first truly global crisis."

"We've paid a very steep price due to a secularized, worldly mentality," he said.

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An index page of *NCR* stories about the Vatican investigation of U.S. women religious is here: NCRonline.org/apostolicvisitation [3].

Editor's note: As we prepared this article for posting, we looked for a photo of U.S. women religious to illustrate it. In the Catholic News Service photo files we found an image from an anniversary celebration for the Daughters of Charity, which we ran with the article. Subsequently we heard from a number of Daughters of Charity who insist they do not want to be associated in any way with the women religious who are not complying with the request of the Vatican appointed Apostolic Visitor to fill out a questionnaire as part of the study. We apologize to the Daughters of Charity for any misunderstandings that might have occurred as a result of our choice of the photo.

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