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Mother Millea urges U.S. religious to comply with study

by Thomas C. Fox



Mother Mary Clare Millea

Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and charged by the Vatican with directing a three-year study of U.S. women religious congregations, has sent letters to religious leaders asking once again for their full cooperation in filling out questionnaires, which are part of the process.

The questionnaires, sent last year to the heads of some 325 religious communities, were to have been returned by Nov. 20. A substantial number of the religious communities -- some women religious leaders saying the "vast majority" of the communities -- refused to comply with an initial Millea request to fill out all the questions on the questionnaire and instead filled out only some or none. A number of religious communities chose, instead, to return to Millea their order's Vatican approved constitutions.

The decisions by congregation leaders not to comply followed nearly two months last fall of intensive discussions both inside and across religious congregations. They followed 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.

Effectively, the acts of noncompliance were mechanisms by U.S. women religious to signal their

collective displeasure at what they view as an unnecessary and ill-formed investigation of their religious communities.

Millea's letter, dated Jan. 12 and placed this week on the official apostolic visitation web site , was the first official acknowledgement of the failure of religious communities to fully comply with the Vatican request for information about the religious communities.

In her letter, Millea said she had returned recently from a meeting in Rome with Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect for the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and the cleric who first initiated the study, formally called an apostolic visitation.

"When I recently met with Cardinal Rodé, he assured me that the Holy Father continues to show his interest in and support of the apostolic visitation," Millea stated. "The cardinal was pleased to hear about the wholehearted and genuine responses of many congregations to the questionnaire. However, I also shared with him my sadness and disappointment that not all congregations have responded to this phase of dialogue with the church in a manner fully supportive of the purpose and goals of the apostolic visitation."

"He encouraged me to ask those who have not yet fully complied to prayerfully reconsider their response. I take this opportunity, then, to once again invite all major superiors who have not responded fully to the questionnaire to do so. I make this request in light of the fact that the questionnaire serves as an integral part of the visitation process. It offers you and your sisters a privileged opportunity to present to the apostolic see your congregation's unique charismatic identity, as well as your communal and ministerial expression of religious life. It likewise affords the apostolic see a way to listen to the joys, accomplishments, hopes and concerns of your sisters and to seek, together with you, strategies for enhancing the vitality of your institute."

Millea said she is aware of the "questions and concerns" women religious have concerning the questionnaire and her staff is eager to resolve these issues.

"It would be helpful for us if you would inform the apostolic visitation office if you intend to amend your response to the questionnaire," she wrote

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

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"For nearly a year now, we women religious have been engaged in a communal seeking of love in truth, a dialogue with the church," the Millea letter states, reaffirming that the purpose of the study is to "enhance the vitality of our congregations, to affirm our sisters and to encourage new membership."

Millea said that in the Phase 1 of the process she engaged in dialogue with superiors general and listened to their hopes and dreams, convincing her of their "love for and pride in their sisters."

"During Phase 2 of the apostolic visitation, you were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding fundamental aspects of your congregation's identity, present life style and future projections. As I reflect

on the fine input submitted by many major superiors in response to the questionnaire, I see that the process is generating much self-evaluation and dialogue between congregational leaders and their sisters. I commend and thank those of you who have shared your stories and hopes, an expression of an authentic search for growth in charity, illumined by the light of truth."

Millea stated that the Phase 3 of the apostolic visitation will begin in April 2010 with on-site visits to "a representative sample of institutes, conducted by teams of religious who will act individually and collectively in the name of the apostolic see." She said visitors were chosen from among religious nominated by superiors general and others "and represent a variety of congregations and areas of expertise."

"Prior to conducting the on-site visits, all potential visitors will participate," she reiterated, "in an orientation workshop during which they will pronounce a public profession of faith and an oath of fidelity to the apostolic see. This profession carries with it a special grace which will strengthen the visitors in their delicate and important task."

The on-site visitors, Millea explained, will engage primarily with the members of leadership teams and a representative group of the sisters. The visitation team members will then formulate a report for her in which they will seek to articulate "the accomplishments, the key strengths and challenges" of each visited community, making appropriate recommendations.

Phase 4 of the visitation process, Millea wrote, will draw from the data gathered in the previous phases and she will prepare for Rode's congregation a summary report of each institute, whether or not an on-site visit has taken place. "Each institute will subsequently receive feedback from the Vatican "for the purpose of promoting its charismatic identity and apostolic vitality in ongoing dialogue with the local and universal church."

Finally, Millea said she was pleased to have received an invitation to the Jan. 14 reception for the opening of the *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* exhibit, at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Millea attended the event.

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