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Sisters hopeful on Tobin's role in Vatican probe

by Michael O'Malley by The Plain Dealer

The recent appointment of an American archbishop to the Vatican office overseeing a wide-ranging investigation of U.S. nuns has the sisters and their supporters breathing a little easier.

Archbishop Joseph Tobin has already acknowledged the "anger and hurt" among U.S. nuns caused by the probe in his new role as the secretary, or No. 2 official, of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

Tobin, who grew up in Detroit, has said he will work to heal any rifts between American sisters and the Catholic hierarchy in Rome. He also hopes to lift a shroud of secrecy surrounding the probe.

"We're very excited by his appointment," said Sr. Mary Ann Flannery, director of the Jesuit Retreat House in Parma, Ohio. "He's coming from an American culture that believes you have a right to defend yourself, a right to have your voice heard."

The investigation, officially known as an "apostolic visitation," is meant to "look into the quality of life" in sisters' religious communities, according to the Vatican.

Currently, the investigative reports are to be kept confidential and turned over to the Vatican panel. Not even the nuns who participate will be allowed to see them.

"That is so offensive," said Flannery. "We basically don't trust any of this."

But Tobin, who took over his new position in September, said in a recent interview with *NCR* that he will work to make the investigation more transparent.

He said he will "strongly advocate" for the rights of nuns to know the findings of the investigation and to

respond to them.

"I'm hoping he will be allowed to fulfill his goal of working for more transparency," said Flannery. "I hope no power (in Rome) finds a way to stifle his voice."

The investigation, begun in December 2008 and scheduled to continue through 2011, has been criticized by many U.S. Catholics as an attempt to rein in U.S. nuns because they are regarded by church hierarchy as too independent and generally too liberal on social issues.

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Many sisters answered the call of the church's Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) which encouraged social activism, freedom of expression and conscience and respect for other religions.

Critics believe the hierarchy in Rome is trying to turn the clock back to a more conservative and traditional church.

"The heart of the issue is not about nuns," said Sr. Diana Culbertson, a retired professor of literature and Scripture at Kent State University. "It's about the interpretation of Vatican II. The current hierarchy of the church does not have the same interpretation of Vatican II as we do."

Culbertson, who refers to the investigation as the "nunquisition," said: "They see us as Marxist-feminist radicals. Rome has a picture of American nuns that doesn't correspond to the picture we have of ourselves.

"They want us in our place. But we don't make vows to the hierarchy. We make our vows to God."

Though Culbertson welcomes the appointment of Tobin to the Vatican panel, she challenges his call for a "reconciliation" between the Vatican and U.S. nuns.

"Reconciliation suggests we both have something to apologize for," she said. "Nuns have no apologies to make."

The investigation was ordered by Cardinal Francis Rode, Tobin's boss at the Vatican office. Rode appointed Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior of the Connecticut-based Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to carry out the investigation.

Millea has mobilized teams of investigators to visit and take notes in sisters' communities across the nation. Those conducting the investigation have declined to comment about it.

Earlier this month, five investigators spent five days at the Cleveland-based Sisters of the Congregation of St. Joseph. Spokeswoman Gina Sullivan said the investigators were polite, gracious and well-received by the congregation. Investigators met with nuns in groups and individually.

"We weren't apprised of the reason for it or what they were looking for," Sullivan said. "We still don't know what the outcome will be. Whether we will ever know remains to be seen."

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, a theologian at Georgetown University who has been an outspoken critic of the investigation, said the appointment of Tobin is "extraordinary."

It's also extraordinary how he has been outspoken about the visitation," said Reese. "This guy has been forthrightly acknowledging that the visitation has upset people tremendously in the United States and that the Vatican has to respond. It's obvious he has heard the concerns."

A separate Vatican panel is investigating the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an umbrella group that represents the leaders of 95 percent of the nation's 59,000 nuns.

The investigation, begun in spring 2009, is called a "doctrinal assessment of the activities and initiatives" of the leadership conference, particularly questions around a male-only priesthood, "the problem of homosexuality" and the role of Jesus in salvation.

Officials of the conference have declined to discuss details of the investigation but Sr. Annmarie Sanders, a spokeswoman for the conference, said LCWR leaders have had no communication with the Vatican panel since April.

Asked whether she feels the nuns' conference is being kept in the dark regarding the investigation, Sanders said, "Very much so."

[Michael O'Malley writes for The Plain Dealer in Cleveland.]

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