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The apostolic visitation of women religious, 780 days later

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COLUMN

I write this on day 780 of the Vatican apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious.

It was on Nov. 22, 2008, that the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life formally issued a decree opening the investigation of U.S. women's religious communities, and virtually each day since has been marked with fruitless anxiety and wasted energy.

Officially, it was the congregation's prefect, 76-year-old Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, who opened the curtain on this tragedy. It's unlikely he acted alone. Heaviest suspicion for this falls on U.S. cardinals who reside in Rome.

From the start, this sad effort has been a child without parents, and for good reason. Once it was brought to the attention of U.S. Catholics and others in the global community, the three-year-plus effort smacked of brazen unfairness. So off the mark was the whole enterprise viewed that it opened otherwise dedicated prelates to accusations of misogyny.

First was the notion of investigating women when clergy sex abuse was the story of the decade, if not the century. Next was the idea that the investigation was hatched in private, entirely by men, without the knowledge of the U.S. women religious leadership, who had sought open dialogue annually by traveling to Rome to meet with Vatican officials.

The women were left out of the process. They were told they would not be able to even view the results of the findings or respond to them before they reached the desks of the men who would act upon them.

Within some premodern context in which male clerics have unlimited authority in all aspects of some women's lives, such demeaning behavior might hold up canonically. However, it did not in the civic arena, where even the most regressive governments are forced to pay lip service to human rights and democracy.

In U.S. terms, it is as if a trial would end after only the prosecution had made its case. To widespread charges of unfairness, the prelates could only say: "Trust us. We know what's best." It wasn't enough.

Calls for "trust" were quickly subverted after word leaked that the examination of the women's lives would cost more than \$1.1 million. Those behind it to this day have not offered any accounting of where this money has come from. Whose church is this, anyhow?

The widely revered women religious were in a bind from day one. To cooperate in an apparently unjust process seemed only to enable the perpetrators. To oppose it put them in a defensive posture. Either way, they lose.

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Facing the dilemma, they pondered for months among themselves and across community lines. After exhaustive and potentially debilitating discernment, they overwhelmingly agreed to a collective response that respected each community's integrity in working out its own response. They also came to see they had inadvertently been offered "a teachable moment," and so their responses would be characterized, as best possible, by charity and integrity.

This ended up meaning most religious communities did not fully comply with the extensive questionnaire sent to them by Rome. Some simply refused altogether; others returned their order's constitutions; still others only partially answered questions.

Rome singled out dozens of communities for site visits, largely conducted by women. By most accounts, these were conducted in a spirit of mutual respect and charity.

For one account of an apostolic visit, see Loretto Sr. Mary Ann Cunningham's piece, **Woman religious finds Vatican-sent Visitators warm, friendly.**

However you might see it, as simple weariness or active charitable resistance, our women religious have tried not to complain, but rather speak with their actions. The sum effect seems to be a headache for the superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mother Mary Clare Millea, who was appointed by Rome to carry out the visitation.

Lacking the cooperation she had hoped for, on Dec. 3, for a second time, she wrote a letter to community heads asking them to reconsider.

"In January 2010, I invited you and other major superiors who did not respond fully to the questionnaire to prayerful reconsider. Since my report to [the Vatican congregation] can only take into account the data I have received, without additional input from you I cannot adequately portray your reality," she wrote.

"Therefore, I once again invite you to send me the data not previously submitted on the apostolic visitation questionnaire. I ask you to include as well any congregational materials requested which you have not already sent."

It is unlikely many women will now change their minds on collective decisions taken within their communities a year and a half ago.

Has Rome gotten the message sent by so many?

In recent months, the top two Vatican posts charged with carrying out the study have changed hands, with ideologues replaced by realists. Taken together, these appointments have the appearances of a Vatican admission that it has overreached, if not openly blundered.

In August, the Vatican appointed an American priest, Fr. Joseph Tobin, a former Redemptorist order superior, to the congregation's No. 2 post. Now-Archbishop Tobin has already opened heartening conversations with U.S. women religious leaders.

And earlier this month, Pope Benedict XVI chose as the new Vatican overseer of religious orders a 63-year-old Brazilian archbishop, João Bráz de Aviz, who expressed disarming ignorance and a willingness to walk with the U.S. women religious. For more information on Aviz, see John Allen's story **New Vatican head of religious life comes without agenda.**

It's too early to know the full content of the final act of this drama. What is clear is that all spirits involved appear tired and wishing it could come to a quick end. Short of this, some editing of the script could help, like recasting the women as authors of their own lives.

Meanwhile, the study that began two years, one month and 20 days ago has been revealing in ways never anticipated by its authors. We have been reminded to think through vital decisions, to recognize they have consequences, and, most importantly, to ask how charity fits into the equation.

Let's pray now the new visitation authors are open to these lessons, and find ways to add redemption to the act. It's their choice. In the Spirit, it is said, all things are possible.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* editor. This column first appeared as an editor's note in the Jan. 21 print issue of *NCR*.]

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