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The Investigation of U.S. Religious Women

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

The "investigation" (the Vatican has called it a "visitation") of U.S. Religious women was formally announced Nov. 22, 2008, in a decree from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, then headed by a 74-year-old Slovenian Cardinal, Franc Rodé.

Tom Fox, editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*, passes on the "heaviest suspicion" that U.S. cardinals residing in Rome were behind the launching of the investigation (see his *NCR* column of Jan. 14).

American cardinals who reside in Rome include William Wakefield Baum, now 84 and long retired as head of the Major Penitentiary; John P. Foley, 75 years old and Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre; Bernard F. Law, age 79, who was forced to resign as Archbishop of Boston and is now archpriest of Santa Maria Maggiore; William J. Levada, 74, who succeeded Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF); James Francis Stafford, 78, retired as head of the Major Penitentiary in 2009; and Edmund C. Szoka, 83, president emeritus of the Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State.

If the suspicion lies anywhere, the likeliest suspects are Cardinals Law, Levada, and possibly Stafford.

But that is neither here nor there. Who influenced the decision is only a matter of speculation. What is important is that the investigation of U.S. Religious women was launched and it has wasted the valuable time and energy of American sisters that could have been invested much more profitably in their many works of ministry.

I did not expect the investigation to go anywhere, but it was easy for me to think that as a male and a non-Religious (see my column from July 2009 in which I predicted that the investigation would come up "more or less empty-handed as did the Vatican's earlier study of U.S. seminaries and theologates").

On Feb 20, 2009, just three months after the original decree authorizing the "visitation," the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith launched an investigation of its own -- a "doctrinal assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which is an association of the leaders of congregations of women Religious in the United States, with more than 1,500 members representing about 95 percent of the 59,000 U.S. women Religious.

Recent developments have tended to confirm my initial prediction. Cardinal Rodé has retired and been replaced by a 63-year-old Brazilian archbishop, João Bráz de Aviz, who has been interviewed by John Allen of *NCR* and described by him as a "moderate-to-conservative." Church sources in Brazil, according to Allen, generally categorize the archbishop as a centrist.

Significantly, he is not a member of a religious order or congregation, but he is close to one of the so-called "new movements," Focolare, which is itself moderately conservative. In any case, he should be an improvement over the ultra-conservative Cardinal Rodé.

Last August the Vatican appointed an American priest, Fr. Joseph Tobin, a former superior in the Redemptorists, to the Congregation's number two post. According to Tom Fox, now-Archbishop Tobin has already opened "heartening" conversations with some U.S. women Religious leaders.

As Tom Fox wrote last month, "It's still 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."

On the same day a "Viewpoint" column by a Sister of Loreto, Mary Ann Cunningham, appeared on-line in *NCR*. Its title discloses its content and tone: "Woman religious finds Vatican-sent Visitors warm, friendly."

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Cunningham wrote: "The four women who visited us" at the motherhouse in Kentucky, "were, well, sisters. I don't know what I expected, but I liked them. Warm, friendly, receptive? though two wore habits, we had so much more in common with them than surface differences would suggest."

These and other recent developments bode well for the future of the "visitation," but again it's easy for a male and non-Religious to say.

Now if only the CDF would come to its senses and terminate its "doctrinal assessment" of the LCWR. Vatican officials surely have more important things to do.

The women Religious in the United States, including the leaders of LCWR, certainly do.

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