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Calming the waters: New Vatican official tries different approach

by John Thavis by Catholic News Service



Brazilian Archbishop Joao Braz de Aviz

VATICAN CITY -- He has only been at the Vatican for four months, but Brazilian Archbishop Joao Braz de Aviz is already getting good reviews.

As the head of the Vatican office that oversees the world's religious orders, the 64-year-old archbishop inherited an inbox full of tensions and an assignment that in some ways resembled a battleground.

In addition to wrapping up a contentious apostolic visitation of women's religious orders in the United States, he faced the challenge of rebuilding trust and channels of communication with the heads of religious orders worldwide.

Archbishop Aviz replaced Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rode, who believed that modern religious orders were in a crisis caused in part by the adoption of a secularist mentality and the abandonment of traditional practices. Cardinal Rode said many religious had misunderstood the Second Vatican Council, and he

faulted women's orders for adopting a "feminist" spirit.

When Pope Benedict XVI named Archbishop Aviz as the new prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the choice surprised many religious superiors. Surprise has now turned to optimism about the future.

"The windows have been opened to fresh approaches. I definitely feel there's a new hope for building deeper and better relationships between (the Vatican congregation) and men and women religious," said U.S. Sister Mary Lou Wirtz, president of the International Union of Superiors General.

Sister Wirtz, superior general of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, said Archbishop Aviz and Archbishop Joseph W. Tobin, secretary of the Vatican congregation, had met recently with leading superiors of religious orders in Rome to talk about problems and prospects for the future.

"It was a very open and good sharing. We really felt their eagerness to build bridges with religious men and women and to rebuild the trust -- especially with the sisters in the United States following the visitation, and all the feelings that surrounded that and the way it happened," Sister Wirtz said in an interview June 2.

Rarely does a newly appointed Vatican official announce publicly that he's going to do things differently. Yet that's the way most people read the interview given by Archbishop Aviz to the Vatican newspaper June 1.

The archbishop began by expressing appreciation for the tremendous contribution made by the approximately 2,000 religious orders around the world. He added that "we bishops and superiors of the church need to have a more positive idea of religious."

He said rebuilding mutual trust between the Vatican and religious orders was a task that needed to be "rediscovered" by his congregation. The Vatican congregation, he said, has been too distant from religious, and he's making it a priority to approach religious superiors on a simple and personal level.

"Only after we've established a dialogue do we discuss issues and try to clear things up if there's a problem. This seems much more fruitful than simply going in with a prejudiced attitude," he said.

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Archbishop Aviz said he also wanted to help improve relations between bishops and religious orders. Often this is not a matter of resolving doctrinal or disciplinary problems, but of speaking calmly with each other and "knowing how to listen," he said.

All this seems to be music to the ears of religious superiors.

"From our point of view, this is a different approach. The congregation seems to understand that its role is one of collaboration, and not so much of confrontation," Father Pascual Chavez Villanueva, the Salesian rector major and president of the Union of Superiors General, told Catholic News Service.

Father Chavez said he appreciates the fact that the Vatican congregation has to deal with problems and issues involving religious orders. But under the new leadership, he said, it is taking a wider view and engaging religious superiors on the questions of mission and new forms of cooperation in evangelization.

"We feel this is a turning point in our relationship with the congregation, and we also think it may be an important element in our future relations with other Vatican congregations -- those dealing with clergy, bishops and doctrine of the faith," Father Chavez said.

Religious superiors carefully read one section of Archbishop Aviz's newspaper interview, in which he spoke of the need to balance a religious order's original charism with the contemporary reality.

"We need to have the courage, on the one hand, to look to the founders as models of fidelity to the rule, and on the other hand to pay attention to today's culture," the archbishop said. "There's always something inside religious orders that needs adaptation to the present moment."

Father Chavez said religious superiors were "on the same wavelength."

"We always speak of a creative fidelity, or dynamic fidelity, to the charism of an order, which takes into account the times in which we live. This ensures that the charism does not become a museum piece, anchored to the past, but remains valid today. Otherwise it wouldn't be able to attract vocations among young people," the Salesian said.

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