

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 11, 2012 at 11:00am

Results of visitation of women religious quietly submitted

by NCR Staff

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Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (CNS photo/courtesy Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus)

Three years after its announcement caused a mixture of anxiety, anger and resentment among many sisters, the results of a Vatican-initiated apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious have been quietly submitted to Rome.

News of the submission came in a press release from the visitation's U.S. office Jan. 9.

According to Catholic News Service, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, confirmed Jan. 10 that the Vatican's congregation for religious life had received the reports and "is now studying them."

Sr. Kieran Foley, the communications liaison for the visitation's U.S. office, told *NCR* her office does not have a comment on the submission. The next steps for the investigation are "entirely up to the [Vatican] congregation," she said.

In the press release, the visitation office said Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the apostolic visitator appointed by the Vatican to undertake the study, had "recently" given an "overall summary" of the visitation's findings to Archbishop Joseph Tobin, secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

The release said Millea had submitted most of the reports on each of the nearly 400 religious

congregations in the United States and hopes to complete the rest by spring.

No details of the reports or the findings of the visitation were included in the release. Foley, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, said "at this point" the mandate of the visitation "has been fulfilled."

News of the submission of the report seems to bring to a close a process that was marked by controversy and miscommunication and stoked fears that Vatican officials wanted to crack down on errant religious congregations or impose restrictions on U.S. sisters.

The visitation was initiated in January 2009 at the command of Cardinal Franc Rodé, then head of the congregation for religious life. Rodé, who has since retired, initially said its aim would be to study the community, prayer and apostolic life of women's orders.

But almost a year into the study, Rodé told Vatican Radio the investigation was in response to concerns, including "by an important representative of the U.S. church," regarding "some irregularities or omissions in American religious life. Most of all, you could say, it involves a certain secular mentality that has spread in these religious families and, perhaps, also a certain 'feminist' spirit."

News of the visitation was followed by an announcement that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents many of the orders of women religious in the United States, would undergo a doctrinal assessment by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

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It was also followed by news that Rodé had asked the U.S. bishops' conference to help cover the cost of the visitation, which was estimated at about \$1 million.

The visitation process began with meetings between Millea and 127 heads of women's orders in the United States. A questionnaire was sent to members of the orders asking them about the orders' identity, governance, vocation promotion, formation policies, spiritual life and finances.

Concerns about the extent and intent of the investigation led many women religious to refuse to fill out the questionnaire or to send back copies of their orders' constitutions in place of answers.

That response led to Millea writing at least three letters asking sisters to reconsider filling out the questionnaire. In one, Millea wrote that her final report "can only take into account the data I have received."

"Therefore, I once again invite you to send me the data not previously submitted on the apostolic visitation questionnaire," she wrote in that Dec. 3, 2010, letter.

After collection of the questionnaires, teams of visitors coordinated by Millea traveled across the country in 2010 to meet with congregational leaders as well as individual members of religious orders. Dozens of volunteers visited about 90 congregations.

As the investigation continued, a marked change in tone seemed to occur as personnel at the Vatican's congregation for religious changed. The No. 2 man at the congregation, Archbishop Gianfranco Gardin, retired in 2009, and Rodé left in 2011.

When Tobin took over the secretary post at the congregation in 2010, the rhetoric of the visitation shifted. Tobin, an American, met with U.S. women religious to discuss the process. He told CNS in August 2011 that the initial phase of the visitation "didn't really favor" dialogue and said he hoped to heal rifts between sisters and the Vatican.

Shortly after the Vatican appointed Rodé's replacement, Brazilian Archbishop João Bráz de Aviz, a year ago, new religious congregation head told *NCR* he wanted to "learn from" and "walk with" U.S women religious and wanted to "create trust."

In the Jan. 9 statement from the visitation office, Millea acknowledged the visitation had "generated widespread interest" and said it had led to "renewed appreciation for the role of religious in the church and society and has increased dialogue and mutual awareness among the various communities in the United States."

Editor's note: For an index of *NCR*'s complete coverage of the apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious, see NCRonline.org/apostolicvisitation.

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