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U.S. women religious study raising new concerns

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Mother Millea

The Vatican-appointed apostolic visitator charged with leading a study of U.S. women religious communities soon will have personally interviewed nearly half the superiors general included in phase one of the effort.

Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Mother Mary Clare Millea, who heads the project, has spoken with women in Rome, by telephone, and also while visiting various U.S. cities. In August she plans to send questionnaires to heads of religious institutes with an eye on beginning on-site visits shortly into 2010.

?The response has been very positive,? said Sr. Eva-Maria Ackerman, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George, the American sister handling communications for the project. ?Mother Millea has already interviewed 50 superiors general in Rome and will soon have completed 77 more in the U.S. She will speak with more after she returns to Rome.?

Phase one of the study, Ackerman said, calls for interviewing some 340 women religious leaders with U.S. generalates, provincialates and houses of formation.

In January, the Vatican?s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life **first announced that it had begun an apostolic visitation** [1], or comprehensive study, of U.S. women religious congregations. The announcement caused considerable uncertainty and alarm among many U.S. women religious who saw it as unnecessary and potentially divisive.

The Vatican action was initiated by the congregation?s prefect, Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé in a decree issued last December. That decree indicated the visitation was being undertaken in order to examine the quality of the life of women religious with an eye to learning why their numbers had fallen in recent decades.

Ackerman, in announcing the study last January, said the visitation is not meant to impose any particular model of religious life on any religious order, but rather **to help ?revitalize and renew?** [2]the congregations.

As part of the project, Millea, in a letter dated May 19 and sent to the superiors general, asked each to give her up to three names of religious who might participate in the planned on-site visitations.

?To assist me in the current process of selecting religious who will be members of visitation teams,? said Millea, ?I am offering each superior general the opportunity to suggest names of potential team members, principally among her own sisters, but not excluding religious of other congregations.

?Male religious may also be appointed as members of visitation teams and will be assigned to those congregations who will have indicated on the questionnaire that they would welcome a member of a men?s religious congregation.?

Millea?s letter noted that those who take part in the work ?will be acting in the name of the Apostolic See? and for this reason ?they must be willing to make a public profession of faith and take an oath of fidelity to the Apostolic See.?

These requests appear to have touched the nerves of some already suspicious women religious.

Canon lawyers, however, who have seen the requested profession of faith and oath say they date back two decades and are required of candidates who hold teaching positions, including roles in the diaconate as well as positions of bishop, pastor, and theology teacher in Catholic seminaries.

The profession of faith involves the recitation of the Nicene Creed followed by three paragraphs add in 1989. These read:

?With firm faith, I also believe everything contained in the Word of God, whether written or handed down in tradition, which the church, either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal magisterium, sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed.

?I also firmly accept and hold each and everything definitively proposed by the church regarding teaching on faith and morals.

?Moreover, I adhere with religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings which either the Roman pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act.?

The oath of fidelity reads, in part:

?With Christian obedience I shall follow what the bishops, as authentic doctors and teachers of the faith, declare, or what they, as those who govern the church, establish.

?I shall also faithfully assist the diocesan bishops, so that the apostolic activity, exercised in the name and by mandate of the church, may be carried out in communion with the church.?

Millea?s letter appears on the **apostolic visitation Web site** [3]. While the profession and oath do not appear, *NCR*

obtained **a copy** [4].

Most women religious interviewed for this article did not want to be quoted by name, fearing they would draw attention to their religious communities. Nearly all remained skeptical about the Vatican-mandated study. Several questioned the need for a profession of faith and an oath in order to be part of the visitation teams. The requirement, these women said, would narrow ranks of potential applicants, making the teams less representative of U.S. women religious today. For these women, the whole matter of fidelity oaths seemed to be adding salt into old wounds.

At issue are gender and authority questions, which have a contentious church history in recent decades.

In June 1998, Pope John Paul II re-opened these issues in an apostolic letter, Ad Tuendam Fidem, enshrining into canon law the tougher 1989 profession of faith and loyalty oath. On that occasion, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, now Pope Benedict XVI, listed examples of non-definitive church teachings that need to be upheld as part of core Catholic teachings. Ratzinger?s commentary singled out the ban on women?s ordination and the invalidity of Anglican ordinations.

?The change in the wording was troubling to many theologians at the time the profession and oath were altered in 1989,? said Fr. James A. Coriden, canon law professor at Washington Theological Union. ?It required not just a personal act of faith, but also to firmly accept and hold certain non-definitive teachings. This went way beyond a profession of faith. Theologically, it seemed at the time like an effort to deal with the issue of the ordination of women.?

Reacting to the news of the requested profession of faith, Franciscan Sister of the Poor Beth Rindler said: ?It seems so obvious that the men in official positions within our church are attempting to control us as women. We are their subjects and we are to do as they tell us, even to what we can think.?
Sister of Loretto Jeannine Gramick lamented the requirements.

Said Gramick: ?If we truly believe that the Spirit is guiding our church, we have no need of professions of faith and loyalty oaths. I feel embarrassed for the church I love when it uses such tactics in the 21st first century ? tactics that are reminiscent of the inquisition, where fear overruled truth, and of Orwellian mind control, where individuals were controlled by the Thought Police.?

Sister of Mercy Theresa Kane said it is both ironic and providential the visitation process is taking place simultaneously with the national opening of a major women?s religious exhibit in Cincinnati. That exhibit highlights the work of U.S. women religious beginning in the 18th century. She called the exhibit ?deeply inspiring? and ?a sacred experience.?

?Having stated this, to think women religious are being directed to sign oaths or a pledge of fidelity is scandalous,? she said. ?We have made lifelong oaths; they are called vows. Before God, we have attempted to live our lives fully with gifts of a rich spiritual life, an effective ministry and in community with other women religious. Such is fidelity and a fidelity that belongs only to one?s loving God.?

In her letter, Millea listed other requirements for those to be considered for the visitation teams. Applicants, she wrote, need to be:

- At least 20 years of religious profession in an institute of pontifical or diocesan right;
- Current membership in good standing in her/his own religious institute, with active and passive voice therein;
- Clear and consistent witness to faithful religious living, in accord with congregational and ecclesial norms;

- Spiritual, human and practical wisdom drawn from extensive experience in interpersonal relationships, both within the community and in ministry;
- Ability to respect confidentiality, listen attentively and dialogue honestly;
- Capacity for working collaboratively with a team in drawing clear and fair conclusions;
- Ability to perceive, verify and clarify essential ideas and data;
- Ability to prepare a written report in a timely manner that is objective, unbiased, accurate and succinct;
- Ability to identify strengths and areas of concern based on data gathered.

There are nearly 400 apostolic religious institutes of women in the United States containing approximately 59,000 women religious. Communities of cloistered, contemplative nuns are not part of the study. At the end of the apostolic visitation process, Millea will submit a confidential report to Rodé based on her observations and findings.

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