

Regarding women religious investigations, hold off on the judgments

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 5, 2009 NCR Today

Does an investigation by any other name feel as frightening? The apostolic visitation of women's religious orders surely has the flavor of an investigation, especially when it was announced that doctrinal issues would be part of the visitor's brief.

Some see a need for such an investigation and, indeed, a reading of the keynote address at last year's keynote address at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious where Sister Laurie Brink praised a group of women religious saying "They are certainly religious women, but they are no longer women religious as it is defined by the Roman Catholic Church. They choose as a congregation to step outside the Church in order to step into a greater sense of holiness. Theirs was a choice of integrity, insight and courage." Those are the kinds of words that understandably raise alarm bells in Rome.

But, I think the visitation should be seen in the context of the earlier visitation of America's seminaries. In both instances, the working papers said a primary focus of the visitation was to assess how the documents of Vatican II were being taught and upheld. This, in turn, ties in with a clear agenda of Pope Benedict's pontificate, which he most clearly articulated in his speech to the Curia in 2005. The Pope called for the Church to set aside the "hermeneutic of discontinuity" with which many had viewed the Council and instead to use a "hermeneutic of reform," a method that would more likely see the Council as in continuity with what went before. This is especially the case for Vatican II where the ressourcement theology of DeLubac and others provided much of the theological groundwork for the conciliar decrees. That theology reclaimed the teachings of the early Church Fathers. It was not spin out of thin air.

I do not see why anyone has, per se, an objection to the Pope's call for a hermeneutic of reform. After all, that entails looking at both the points of continuity and discontinuity, at how new situations called forth innovative applications of ancient theological truths.

Perhaps the inside discussions are more bare-knuckled than has been reported. But, it is wrong to fault the Holy See for insisting that the whole Church continue to reflect upon what Vatican II did and did not accomplish. Furthermore, the fact that Cardinal William Levada is in charge of the doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference is a re-assuring sign. Nothing in his career has indicated that the cardinal is a bomb-thrower or a latter-day inquisitor. We should withhold judgment until all the facts are in.