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LCWR seeks full disclosure of Vatican visitation

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Aug. 18, 2009

Leaders representing 59,000 women religious are questioning what they say is a lack of full disclosure about what is motivating the Vatican's apostolic visitation that will study the contemporary practices of U.S. women's religious orders.

In an Aug. 17 press statement, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious also said the leaders "object to the fact that their orders will not be permitted to see the investigative reports about them" when they are submitted in 2011 to the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and its prefect, Cardinal Franc Rode.

In addition, the women religious expressed concern about secrecy they say is surrounding the funding of the study, said Sr. Annmarie Sanders, director of communications for LCWR.

No details on funding the study have been released by the office of the Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States.

"Part of the conversation revolved around the fact that at a time when congregations of religious women are financially strapped they are concerned about being asked to pay for an investigation they did not ask for," Sister Annmarie said.

The concerns emerged Aug. 14 as 800 members of the LCWR concluded a four-day meeting in New Orleans.

Sister Annmarie, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, declined to be more specific about what the leaders discussed privately regarding the visitation.

"We're waiting to see how it (the visitation) plays out," Sister Annmarie told Catholic News Service Aug. 17. "We're in the middle of it now. We don't know what the next steps are going to be (like).

"They don't want to judge ahead of time. But certainly there's some apprehension right now," she said.

The Vatican-ordered visitation is looking at the broad realm of religious life of 341 U.S. congregations of women religious.

A working document -- known as an "instrumentum laboris" -- outlining the areas the visitation will cover was sent to superiors general in early August. Members of the orders were being asked to reflect on the working document. It serves as a prelude to a separate questionnaire that will be sent to the superiors Sept. 1, marking the start of the study's second phase.

The questionnaire will cover each order's life and operation, identity, governance, vocation promotion, admission requirements and formation policies, spiritual life and common life, mission and ministry, and finances.

The questionnaires are due Nov. 1 at the apostolic visitation office in Hamden, Conn. Once the questionnaires are analyzed, individual congregations will be selected for a visit by a visitation team starting in January. Not all religious congregations will be visited.

After the working document was sent to the superiors, Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the apostolic visitator charged by the Vatican with directing the study, declined to identify how the study was being funded.

She told CNS July 31 that, while the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life is ultimately responsible for paying for the study, individual congregations being visited will be asked to cover the cost of lodging and transportation for the visitation team.

The outgoing LCWR president, Sister J. Lora Dambroski, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, urged the leaders gathered in New Orleans to move forward together as the study evolves.

Citing passages from the Gospel of Luke, Sister Lora urged the women to continue their efforts to build a new world despite its increasing chaos and disorder.

She called for the women to understand that what they may have held on to tightly in the past should be reassessed so that new patterns of life and new practices can emerge while they adhere to core beliefs.

"Simply put, we are no longer as we once were. We can't be," she said.

"We are in the midst of a unique time of Spirit-filled chaos and unique invitation to ongoing creativity in the living of Gospel commitment," she said. "This is another defining moment in our conference and our collective histories and future."

She asked the leaders to consider ways to "positively grasp this time as (an) opportunity to tell our present stories, of how we still are faithful vowed Gospel women."

The leaders also approved what was described as a "call" that includes a series of steps to carry the organization through a five-year period ending in 2015. Among them is the development and implementation each year of a study to review and reflect on emerging questions, issues and trends affecting vowed religious life.

A committee, chaired by the LCWR executive director, and with members from the board, at-large representatives and the national office staff, will oversee the process.

LCWR represents 95 percent of U.S. women religious.

Editor's Note:

The full text of the LCWR press release can be found online at www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/09/LCWRassembly09.pdf.

More information on the apostolic visitation can be found online at www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/index.html.

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