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Few dioceses admit willingness to pay for visitation

Judy Gross | Oct. 26, 2009

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Just two of 61 U.S. archdioceses and dioceses contacted by *NCR* said they would dip into local church coffers to support the Vatican's controversial visitation of U.S. women religious congregations.

NCR called and e-mailed every archdiocese in the country, as well as a sampling of 29 dioceses across time zones. Twenty-two archdioceses responded to the inquiry, while only seven dioceses did. Many refused to comment, while others cited the difficult economy as a reason they would not contribute to the three-year visitation process, which the Vatican estimates will cost $1.1 million.

Cardinal Franc Rodé, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, has asked the U.S. bishops to support the three-year study. "I am asking you, my brother bishops, for your help in offsetting the expenses which will be incurred by this work for the future of apostolic religious life in the United States," Rodé said in a July 14 letter to every U.S. bishop. If every one of the 178 Latin rite dioceses contributed equally, the tab would be nearly $6,200 each.

"There are several orders that have their roots in our archdiocese and the archbishop, Joseph Kurtz, has communicated his desire to cooperate with this visitation," said Cecelia Price, spokeswoman for the Louisville, Ky., archdiocese. In addition, said Price, "it is customary that expenses related to initiatives of the Holy See ... are shared by the U.S. diocese."

This sentiment was shared by Salt Lake City Bishop John Wester, according to spokeswoman Colleen Gudreau. "We cooperate with all church activities," she said.

Custom notwithstanding, several dioceses indicated they will pass on this collection. "We have no vested interest in this, as we have no institutes of religious in this diocese, so I see no reason to contribute," Bishop Robert Vasa of Baker, Ore., told *NCR*.

"We are not going to be able to contribute," said Los Angeles archdiocesan spokesperson Tod Tamberg. The archdiocese, he said, is facing tough financial times. "I'm calling from a cubicle in a rented warehouse the diocese used to own. We've had no pay raises for clergy or staff in two years."

Meanwhile, Deacon Jake Arellano of the Pueblo, Colo., diocese said, "We do not have the funds to support this. We are settling 26 clergy abuse cases and we are a mission diocese. We are hurting."

Others, such as Omaha, Neb., Archbishop George Lucas, are keeping their decisions private. "He hasn't made a decision and he won't discuss it when he does," said a spokesperson for Lucas.

Likewise, Jim Goodness, spokesman for Newark, N.J., Archbishop John Myers, said, "The archbishop makes these decisions privately."

In Chicago, archdiocesan spokesperson Colleen Dolan said, "Cardinal Francis George does not discuss his personal correspondence between the Vatican and himself."

Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk "has not responded to Cardinal Rodé," according to spokesperson Dan Andriacco.

No response or "no comment" came from the archdioceses of Washington; Denver; Hartford, Conn.; Santa Fe, N.M.; Oklahoma City, Okla.; Galveston-Houston; New Orleans; St. Paul-Minneapolis; Philadelphia; Boston; San Francisco; Anchorage, Alaska; and Indianapolis.

New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan's spokesman, Joseph Zwilling, said he asked three chancery staff about the Rodé letter, and "nobody knows what I am talking about."

In the Baltimore archdiocese, communications director Sean Caine sent a recent column by Archbishop Edwin O'Brien by way of response. "I cannot help but see some reactions on the sisters' part which were very similar to those on the part of formation and seminary personnel at the announcement of both prior visitations," wrote O'Brien. "Why us? Why now? Why the secrecy? Have we done something wrong?"

He continued, "In time, once the process gained momentum, most of the seminaries accepted the visitation and in the end even found it most beneficial. I hope and pray the same will be said about the current visitation."

Judy Gross writes from Tallahassee, Fla.

Editor's Note: An update to this story.

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