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Cardinal RodÈ defends apostolic visitation of US nuns

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Nov. 3, 2009

Cardinal Franc RodÈ (Photo: Catholic News Service)

VATICAN CITY
Cardinal Franc Rodé, head of the Vatican office overseeing religious orders, said he requested an apostolic visitation of women's religious orders in the United States to help the sisters and to respond to concerns for their welfare.

"This apostolic visitation hopes to encourage vocations and assure a better future for women religious," the cardinal said in a statement released Nov. 3 by the Vatican.

Cardinal Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, said his statement was in response to "many news accounts" and inquiries about the visitation, which was announced in January.

Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York posted an article on his blog Oct. 29 listing what he called examples of anti-Catholicism in *The New York Times*, including an Oct. 21 column regarding the apostolic visitation.

Calling the column by Maureen Dowd "intemperate and scurrilous," Archbishop Dolan said the investigation of U.S. women religious "is well worth discussing and hardly exempt from legitimate questioning," but he objected to the writer using "every anti-Catholic caricature possible" to illustrate her point that the nuns are being picked on by the Vatican.

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href="http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/cardinal-franc-rod%C3%A9-statement-apostolic-visitation">Full text of statement issued by Cardinal Franc Rodé

Cardinal Rodé insisted that the apostolic visitation is a response to "concerns expressed by American Catholics -- religious, laity, clergy and hierarchy -- about the welfare of religious women and consecrated life in general."

He said his office already had been considering convoking an apostolic visitation when he traveled to the United States in 2008 for a symposium on religious life at Stonehill College in Easton, Mass. The symposium was part of celebrations marking the 200th anniversary of the Archdiocese of Boston.

"The multitude and complexity" of the problems and challenges facing U.S. religious were made clear by speakers at the symposium, the cardinal said.

"This helped me understand that such an evaluation of the challenges facing individual religious and their congregations would benefit the church at large as well as the sisters and institutes involved," he said.

Cardinal Rodé wrote that he hoped the visitation not only would give the Vatican an accurate and thorough picture of the life of U.S. women religious, but that it also would be "a realistic and graced opportunity for personal and community introspection as major superiors and sisters cooperate in this study."

The cardinal said he was pleased that three-fourths of U.S. superiors general took part in the first phase of the visitation, communicating their hopes and concerns about the study to Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, whom the Vatican appointed as apostolic visitator.

The second phase of the visitation was launched in September when Mother Clare distributed questionnaires asking for a wide range of information about each order, including membership, living arrangements, the ministries in which members participate and spiritual life, including the practice of prayer and the frequency of Mass.

Cardinal Rodé said the information culled from "the standard, objective data" regarding membership, living arrangements, governance and ministries of the members of the religious orders would be made public "and should provide important information regarding the likely future trends of religious life in the United States."

Beyond that, he said, his office "will formulate no conclusions or plan of action, if any, until the final report of the visitator has been evaluated."

The cardinal said that so far he is "encouraged by the efforts to identify the signs of hope as well as concerns within religious congregations in the United States, which are also likely to have implications elsewhere in the world."

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