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Two heartfelt support letters regarding U.S. women religious

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 5, 2010 NCR Today

In a Nov. 16, 2009 letter to Cardinal Franc Rode, who is leading a three-year investigation of U.S. women religious congregations, Xaverian Brother Peter Fitzpatrick describes himself as "an elderly retired religious teaching brother, quite elderly in fact (82 in a month?s time), and not so sharp or quick as I used to be."

He is so much more.

His entire letter [1]is worth reading; let me quote from it here. But first listen to Fizpatrick detail some of his credentials, as he respectfully addresses Rode : "I have had a fair amount of experience that might be of use to you as you pursue this 'visitation.' I have served as provincial councilor to several provincials in my congregation over the years. In the seventies (1971-77) I was elected as Vicar General and served at our generalate in Rome, Italy. Following that, I was Co-Director of The Spiritual Integration Program for Experienced Men and Women Religious with Sr. Margaret Brennan, IHM (former Superior General of the IHM, Monroe, MI) in Toronto, Canada, under the auspices of the Jesuit Theologate, Regis College. From there I was elected and then re-elected Provincial of the American Central Province of the Xaverian Brothers in Kensington, MD. After my time as provincial, I served as the Executive Director of the National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy (NOCERCC), headquartered in Chicago, until I retired in 1993."

This is a brother with major pastoral credentials. It is also a brother who heartbroken that Rode's congregation is involved in an investigation of U.S. women religious congregations.

He writes charitably: "You may not agree with what I am about to say, but I hope that I shall speak ? and you listen - in ... Pauline spirit."

But firmly: "Laity and sisters now consider your 'visitation' most unjust, unworthy of you as Prefect and unworthy of the Congregation, - brutally oppressive of the greater majority of religious women?s congregations in this country. And lay women especially see it as one more example of the Vatican?s oppression of women throughout its long history.

"The laity see it as abuse: a bullying of our sisters to force them to conform to your narrow views. The final straw for them has been the release of the information that this 'visitation' will cost $1.1 million, and that you have requested the U.S. Bishops to pay for it!

"Is it so surprising that some have begun to question your sanity: 1.1 million dollars when many dioceses have declared bankruptcy and others are on the verge of doing so, -- while the economy is in a desperate downspin? ...

"Many people, sisters included, are stating outright that they cannot in good conscience comply with or participate in this abusive and demeaning procedure. Many are saying right out that the answer that should be given to you and your visitators is simply, 'We cannot in good conscience do as you request.'

"Cardinal, not only the sisters but also the laity judge more and more clearly that it would be morally wrong to submit to your 'visitation.' They see that it is basically wrong to submit to abuse, to being abused, - to participate in the demeaning of one?s own person and that of one?s congregation. ...

"I ask myself and pray, ?What can be done??

Fitzpatrick clearly thinks the visitation should be called off.

So late last month, after more reflection, he wrote another letter [2]to Rode, detailing a path to calling off the visitation.

Here's Fitzpatrick again, writing to Rode Jan. 28th:

"It is now public news that many US women religious have not complied with Phase II of your visitation, and that you have asked them to rethink their positions, return to your questionnaires and complete them as you desired. ...

"I submit to you that come April, when you plan to begin Phase III of this visitation, with Phase II uncompleted, you will find yourself at an impasse. What do you propose to do?

"I want to make a suggestion ? one by which, I think, you may bring this unhappy situation to a peaceful resolution.

"I suggest that before the end of February you communicate to all the U.S. apostolic religious women the following points:

- First, that after carefully studying their responses to Phase II and reflecting on them, you can see that there is now no real need for an apostolic visitation and that you thereby designate it as officially closed.
- Secondly, that you sincerely want to thank all the U.S. sisters for their great honesty in their responses to your requests.
- Finally, that you would like the leadership of the LCWR to arrange and prepare at their convenience a meeting of their entire membership whereby you could come as an invited and willing participant to hear

> about their hopes and fears, to listen to them most sincerely, and to engage with them in dialogue to devise the best ways in which you may be of true service to them in your role as Prefect of the Congregation.

"I am convinced that if you use this approach, you will find the U.S. sisters most cooperative. And you may, despite any misgivings, find yourself truly enlightened and your vision both broadened and deepened.

"I appeal to you in the spirit of your own Founder, so ready to meet the changes of his own time. Meet these sisters in their own right as full, free adult persons, chosen and dedicated followers and servants of the Lord, filled with His spirit, and most willing to offer His wisdom and love.

Sincerely yours,

Peter A. Fitzpatrick, CFX
Xaverian Brothers

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/news/women/brother-fitzpatricks-nov-16-2009-letter-cardinal-rode
[2] http://ncronline.org/news/women/brother-fitzpatricks-jan-28-letter-cardinal-rode