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Brother Fitzpatrick's Nov. 16, 2009 letter to Cardinal Rode

Peter Fitzpatrick | Feb. 5, 2010

Xavier Brother Peter Fitzpatrick's Nov. 16, 2009 letter to Cardinal Franc Rode:

Franc Cardinal Rode, CM
Prefect for the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life
Piazza Pio XII, 3
00193 Roma,
Italy

Dear Cardinal Rode:

My topic is your ?apostolic visitation? of the women religious in the United States. I ask you please to bear with me and to listen to what I have to say.

I am 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. Still 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. Then in ?active? retirement, so to speak, I continued to direct retreats for diocesan and religious priests throughout the Midwest and California, and for religious missionaries in Japan and Bolivia until 2004. During these many years I worked very closely with the leadership of religious women?s congregations and that of the LCWR, both in Rome, Italy, and in the United States.

My experience over the years, especially my experience with American, British, Canadian, and Japanese religious women, prompts me to write to you ? in the spirit of St. Paul?s advice, ?speak to one another honestly in love.? You may not agree with what I am about to say, but I hope that I shall speak ? and you listen - in that Pauline spirit.

I believe that you are aware of the very negative reaction of many Catholics that is building against your ?apostolic visitation? of women religious in the United States. I wonder if you realize how your word-of-mouth comments to Vatican Radio on November 4 give the lie to the softer, more general comments expressed in the statement released by the Vatican November 3. Many people, lay and religious, now see your ?visitation? as a sudden one-sided attack, without prior consultation or dialogue, upon the integrity and fidelity of the vast majority of our United States apostolic religious sisters. Now they see it to be just as many suspected from the beginning when it was first announced: that it originated in your own thinking, prejudiced and biased as it is

regarding religious women, and was further fed and confirmed by your participation in the Stonehill College Symposium, September 27, 2008.

[You must realize now, if you had not done so before, that this Symposium was one of the most conservative and biased symposia on religious life in recent years, and one in which many of the unsuspecting participants were shocked and scandalized, including some of my own New England brothers, one a former Superior General.]

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 dollars ($1,100,000), 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? Laity, who are still reeling from the over 2-billion dollars of their money (do you get that? ? 2 billion dollars! $2,000,000,000!) which has been paid out for the clerical sex abuse scandal and episcopal cover-up, are very angry that they are now asked for an additional $1,100,000 to pay for you to investigate the innocent sisters.

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 believe that you should expect more and more to send you the simple concise reply: ?I (We) cannot in good conscience do as you request.? You should expect more and more to see this simple sentence and only it written across your questionnaires: ?I cannot in good conscience do as you request.?

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

What can we do?

As I reflect on this situation, an incident of long ago comes to my mind, an incident from 1965-66. Indulge me still further to listen carefully to what I am about to say. At a large area-meeting at our college in Maryland held by the General Council of our congregation in preparation for changing our constitutions in response to Vatican II, the great canonist Fr. Paul Boyle, CP, was invited to address us. During the period that followed, I rose to ask him a question. ?How can you tell that an idea you get, an inspiration you have, comes from God? How can you know that some proposal you want to make really comes from God and not from your own selfish nature??

I remember Father Paul?s answer very clearly. He replied that St. John of the Cross gives us a good test; St. John of the Cross poses to us three questions, and your answers to those three questions will give you a good indication whether your idea is really from God or not. The questions are:

1. Do I present it as a knight in armor, coming in on a white charger, lance leveled, visor down, ready to charge and conquer? If I do, then the idea is very questionable ? very questionable that the idea comes from God. It is not absolutely certain that it doesn?t, but it is very questionable.

2. Have I consulted others about it - wise, experienced people, of sound judgment?
Not my friends who think similarly, and who will always affirm and support me. And not my enemies or those who do not like me, and who will always veto every idea of mine. But rather, have I consulted people known for their knowledge, prudence and wisdom, experienced in the ways of man and God, and who will give me an honest answer? If such persons agree with my idea, I can be fairly certain that it is from God.

3. Is the idea for the common good? Does it really promote the common good? And this is the most important question of the three: if it does not promote the common good, I can be sure that it is not from God.

That is the teaching of St. John of the Cross, told to me (and the rest of the brothers at that assembly) years ago, and it has served me in good stead ever since.

Let us take a look at these three questions in regard to your ?apostolic visitation? of the sisters.

1. Have you come in on a white charger, lance drawn and leveled, etc.? It seems to me that you may have. There was no warning to the sisters ? no prior dialogue, no asking for their opinions, etc. They have the feeling that you sprang it on them ? without any real explanations, reasoning, consultation. Is this idea from God? ? very questionable, I would say, according to St. John of the Cross.

2. Have you consulted wise, experienced people ? those known for wide and deep knowledge, and for sound judgment? Have you? What we have seen ? and have been told by you ? is that you were in consultation with those at the Symposium at Stonehill College and that the idea was confirmed there. Was this a consultation with your ?friends,? those of like mind and thought? Were these people known for breadth and depth of view ? for sound judgment? I must say that none of them strike me that way. One of them is a well known ?professional? who has made a career out of attacking those ?modern? sisters who have made their poor elderly traditional sisters feel so unhappy in their convents and so frightened by their modern sister-leaders, and who must always remain nameless because they spoke to this author in the strictest confidence. Known for knowledge, prudence, wisdom, sound judgment? ? I don?t think so. One was Bishop Robert Morlino, who has made headlines on the national and local scene, but not for prudence and wisdom ? a man who has hardly endeared himself to his priests by spying on them and trying to pry into and force the release of confidential information about their reactions to his ideas in a survey he himself agreed to. Bishop Morlino, a man originally from Scranton who during the national presidential campaign publicly challenged Vice President Biden to a school yard brawl (?He?s a scrappy Catholic kid from Scranton. . . .

So am I. And I bet that back in high school I was scrappier than he was.?) ? prudence, wisdom, sound judgment? True he redeemed himself lately by his fine words about the Kennedy funeral (where all prior expectations had been that he too would call for Kennedy not to be allowed burial in consecrated ground). But I think ?Scrapper Bob? really has a long way to go before he would qualify according to St. John of the Cross.

Did you consult any American Vincentian provincials? -- any provincials in the CMSM who would be known for knowledge, prudence and wisdom about the American sisters? Did you consult any sister-leaders at the LCWR?

3. Will this particular ?apostolic visitation? promote the common good? Have you considered this question when you were conceiving your plan? It seems to me that the answer is clearly in the negative. Your visitation has already upset needlessly many, many sisters. It has caused pain and stress to the leadership of almost all, if not all, the congregations. It has really angered the laity. It is possible that it will cost a truly exorbitant amount of money. It has the very high potential of turning one group of sisters against another ? of deepening the divide between the 5% ?traditional? sisters of the CMSWR and the 95% sisters of the LCWR. As far as I can judge now, it seems to me that the ?apostolic visitation? will work against, and is already working against, the

common good.

I am convinced that your ?visitation? is not really a good idea ? that it seems certainly not from God, and that it is going to cause more harm than good.

If I am correct, what then should we do?

I think, Cardinal, that you must call the ?visitation? off. Consult knowledgeable, prudent, and wise people to discover the easiest and quickest way to do this, one that helps save as much embarrassment as possible for everyone, and that restores peace and serenity to all concerned, the sisters and the laity.

I believe that if you do not call this ?visitation? off, if you try to push it through, you will find yourself unsupported by many bishops ? most if not all. (Those in Southern California have already spoken). The laity will scorn you and certainly fight you over the money question, and the sisters will in the majority refuse in conscience to comply.

You can be assured of my prayers, poor as they may be. We can place our trust in the Lord who always comes to our aid when we need Him.

Sincerely yours in Our Lord,

Peter A. Fitzpatrick, CFX

cc.: Archbishop Pietro Sambi, Apostolic Nuncio
Francis Cardinal George, OMI, President of USCCB
Joseph E. Kurtz, Archbishop of Louisville
Sr. J. Lora Dombroski, OSF, President of LCWR, USA
Thomas Picton, C.Ss.R., President of CMSM, USA

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