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35 religious communities visited; 80 to go

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Jun. 16, 2010

Mother Mary Clare Millea (CNS)

WASHINGTON -- Visits to religious communities of women will restart in mid-September after a three-month summer hiatus, reported the Office of Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States.

Sr. Kieran Foley, assistant for communications for the process, told Catholic News Service that 35 congregations were visited during the first round of visits that started April 11 and ended June 4.

Beginning again Sept. 12 and running through Dec. 17, the next round of visits will include another 40 to 50 congregations, said Foley, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist.

"We're trying to do about 25 percent of all religious congregations," she said from the visitation's office in Hamden, Conn. "Between 80 and 100 will be the final total."

A total of 341 religious congregations are the subjects of the visitation, ordered in 2009 by Cardinal Franc Rode, prefect of the Vatican's Congregations for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

The study covers nearly all of the country's 67,000 sisters. Only those nuns who live in cloisters are exempt.

In a statement to CNS, 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 comprehensive study, said the initial visits went well.

The visits, encompassing the third phase of the apostolic visitation, "gives every sister the opportunity to share her hopes, joys and concerns," said Millea, who was in Rome in mid-June preparing for her order's general chapter meeting.

"This is so valuable since the congregations are not just organizations but are made up of these living witnesses who each hold and treasure the charism in their hearts and express it uniquely in their ministry," she said.

In a video posted on the apostolic visitation's website, Millea said the 74 visitors appreciated the "warm and

welcoming spirit of hospitality" shown by the congregations during their visits, she said.

Millea, a Connecticut native, also offered a breakdown of the 34 congregations visited:

Thirteen had less than 100 members. The largest congregations visited had several hundred members. The congregations were spread across 18 states.

"They [the visitors] say the initial fears [of the congregations] usually are quickly dissipated and listening to the sisters' stories, hopes and dreams has been a privileged experience for them as well," she said in the video.

"Both visitors and the visited have spoken of the visitation as a special time of grace," she added.

Foley said that congregations were selected in the hope of having a representative sample of religious communities involved in the study. The process will conclude in 2011 with a final report to Cardinal Rode. The report will not be made public or shared with the religious communities.

"They [the congregations selected] have different apostolates and growth patterns," she said. "There were older communities and newer communities. No particular orders were signaled. Nothing was pre-planned."

Overall, visitors in groups of two to five spread across the country during the first nine weeks of visits. The vast majority were women religious, Foley said, although some priests were among the visitors.

As each visit concluded, the team of visitors completed its report on site before sending its findings to the apostolic visitation's Connecticut headquarters, Foley explained.

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More information about the apostolic visitation can be found online at www.apostolicvisitation.org.

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