

New Vatican leader 'extremely positive' on women

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 4, 2010



Joseph Tobin

Saying he hopes to offer the Vatican a "different picture" of women religious in the United States, Rome's new number two official for religious life says he suspects the choice of an American for that job, and one known to be sympathetic to women religious, may reflect awareness of "just how badly" a controversial Vatican investigation of women's orders has been received.

Fr. Joseph Tobin spoke with *NCR* Aug. 3, one day after his appointment by Pope Benedict XVI as the new Secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, colloquially known as the "Congregation for Religious." It oversees affairs involving some 190,000 religious priests and brothers, and roughly 750,000 sisters, worldwide.

Read the transcript of John Allen's interview here: [Q&A with Fr. Joseph Tobin](#) [1]

Tobin, 58, is a native of Detroit who served from 1997 to 2009 as Superior General of the Redemptorist order in Rome. He had been at Oxford University in England on sabbatical prior to his Vatican appointment. He will be ordained an archbishop when he takes up the post.

Traditionally, the secretary of a Vatican congregation is the official who coordinates its day-to-day work, while the cardinal-prefect provides broad overall direction. Tobin's role is likely to be all the more important in the Congregation for Religious given that its current prefect, Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, is already past the usual retirement age of 75 and is widely expected to be replaced soon.

Speaking on background, Vatican sources told *NCR* in early August that one reason Tobin was appointed was to ensure that someone with a strong background in religious life is already in place when that transition occurs.

Though Tobin will have broad responsibility for matters involving religious life all over the world, one hot-button challenge he inherits right away is the Apostolic Visitation of women's religious orders in the United States. Some American sisters have taken the investigation as a vote of "no confidence" from the church's male-dominated power structure.

"There's a great deal of misunderstanding among American religious about the decisions of the Holy See, and in particular the visitation of women religious," Tobin said.

"Maybe I can offer a different picture of American women religious than the one that sometimes has been presented in Rome," Tobin said. "My own impression is extremely positive."

At present, the visitation is in what organizers refer to as "phase three," meaning a series of on-site visits to women's orders in America. It follows phase one, constituted by personal exchanges between Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Mary Clare Millea, the coordinator of the visitation, and the superiors of women's orders, and phase two, formed by written responses to questionnaires mailed to every congregation in the country.

The fourth and final phase will consist of preparing detailed reports on all 420 "units" of women's religious life in America, meaning orders as well as their individual provinces, to be sent to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life during 2011.

In terms of what Rome eventually does with that input, Tobin said he hopes to bring a fresh perspective.

"I feel I can bring something to that, because I've worked all my life with women's religious," Tobin said. "They taught me when I was a kid, and my mother's family was very close to the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters. I've preached women's retreats and listened a lot to them over the years."

Tobin speculated that perhaps the choice of an American for the secretary's role in the Congregation for Religious could "suggest some awareness of just how badly this thing [the visitation] has gone down."

This week, Tobin is in Long Beach, Calif., for a meeting of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the umbrella group in the United States for men's religious orders. Officers from the companion body for women, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, will also be attending, and Tobin said he intends to meet with them.

"I want to have a frank discussion, to help me shape my thinking and whatever proposals I might bring to the congregation," he said.

Tobin said his main aim will be to find a way to "bring life" out of the Apostolic Visitation, meaning to convert it into a positive experience.

Leaders in women's religious life seem bullish about the Tobin appointment.

"Fr. Joe Tobin is held in high regard by U.S. men and women religious," said an Aug. 3 statement from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

"He brings a breadth of knowledge of matters impacting religious life and has a wide range of experience and expertise. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious looks forward to working with him in his new position."

Tobin said he anticipates being back in Rome to take up his new post sometime in early September.

[John L. Allen Jr. is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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