

Unity has sprung from visitation, says congregation leader

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 8, 2011



Sisters of Providence Mary Caritas and Kathleen Popko at the opening of the LCWR's "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America" exhibit.

FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA. -- As a Vatican-sponsored apostolic visitation of religious women in the United States nears an end, one American sister says the investigation has produced a spirit among women's orders that is "the most unified it's ever been in U.S. history," predicting this "cohesiveness" will outlast the review itself.

Sr. Kathleen Popko, president of the Sisters of Providence, spoke during a May 22-24 government and management conference of the Catholic Health East system of hospitals and health care facilities.

Launched in December 2008, the apostolic visitation is currently in its final phase of submitting reports to the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The process is expected to wrap up by the end of the year.

American Archbishop Joseph Tobin, a former religious superior of the Redemptorists and secretary of the Vatican congregation, has said he's committed to offering women's orders a possibility of responding to the reports before policy decisions are made.

Popko said the visitation has underlined some important insights about religious life.

She defined women's orders as "a prophetic life form in the church," insisting that they are not to be seen as a "work force for ecclesial projects."

Women religious "strive to work collaboratively with the ordained leadership of the church," she said, yet they "are not agents of the church enforcing its teachings and policies," and "must not be co-opted for institutional purposes."

Popko conceded that putting the accent on the "prophetic" role is in some ways a prescription for conflict, but insisted that's nothing new. Perusal of the lives of founders in centuries past, she said, reveals that some were forced to leave their dioceses or were removed from leadership, while their fledgling communities had their assets taken away or faced other sanctions for "insubordination to the clergy."

Popko identified five major lessons from the visitation.

First, she said, the visitation has taught women religious to "look inward." In responding to the Vatican investigation, she said, women's orders found a deeper "sense of dignity" and of their own "competence," rooted in their history and accomplishments. That experience, she said, has fueled "a sense of cohesiveness and solidarity" that will outlast the visitation itself.

Second, Popko said, it's important "to network and collaborate," adapting a "flexible but common approach" when confronted with new challenges. Today, she said, the spirit among women's orders is "the most unified it's ever been in U.S. history," a unity she said "happened at the grass roots."

Third, Popko urged, "Do not stand alone." Instead, she said, women's orders have drawn upon canon lawyers, theologians and other experts who have helped them develop a better-informed response to the visitation -- including, for instance, how to reply to requests for financial data and other internal information.

Fourth, Popko said, "Maintain engagement," including with the clergy, the bishops, and various currents within the laity. In responding to the visitation, she said, women's orders "did not rupture relationships. We've kept the conversation going."

Fifth, Popko said, the bottom line is "to remain faithful to the Gospel call." That has involved much soul-searching, she said, as women religious have struggled to maintain unity with church leaders, while remaining determined that "we must be true to ourselves, to our consciences, wherever that may lead us."

"In the history of the religious orders, we see that much positive change was initially rejected by the church but eventually accepted," Popko said, implying that the same trajectory may well play itself out again today.

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