

Vatican begins study of US women religious

Thomas C. Fox | Jan. 30, 2009



Mother Mary Clare Millea

The Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has begun an Apostolic Visitation or comprehensive study of institutes of women religious in the United States.

The action was initiated by the Congregation's prefect, Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, C.M. The decree, issued Dec. 22, 2008, indicated the Visitation is being undertaken in order to look into the quality of the life of the members of these religious institutes.

The Visitation will be conducted under the direction of Superior General of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mother Clare Millea, whom Cardinal Rodé appointed Apostolic Visitor. Mother Millea, a Connecticut native, heads the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, an international religious institute headquartered in Rome, with approximately 1250 professed sisters worldwide, including 135 in the United States. She entered religious life in 1965 and professed perpetual vows in 1973.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the nation's largest association of Catholic women religious communities, said it was informed of the study in a bulletin Friday.

"We hope that the results of the apostolic visitation will demonstrate the vitality and depth of the life and service of women religious in the United States," the conference said in a statement.

The Visitation, which will collect and assimilate data and observations about religious life, will be limited to apostolic institutes, those actively engaged in service to Church and society. Cloistered, contemplative sisters, who have distinctly different lifestyles, are excluded from the study. Mother Millea will submit a confidential report to Cardinal Rodé at the conclusion of the task. Though there is no deadline, she hopes to complete the task by 2011.

Catholic women religious have been involved in apostolates such as education, healthcare and a variety of pastoral and social services in the United States since before the nation was founded. According to the Washington-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) however, the number of U.S. women religious has been in decline during the past 40 years, while their median age continues to increase.

The Vatican-organized visitation of seminaries and house of formation for men, which happened in 2006, recently issued its final report, and it seemed to suggest concern about formation for religious. The following is taken from the "general conclusions" in section II:

"It was also noted that, in some academic centers run by religious, there is a certain reticence, on the part of both students and teachers, to discuss the priestly ministry. Instead, there is a preference for discussing simply "ministry" in the broad sense, including also the various apostolates of the laity in part, perhaps, as a mistaken attempt not to offend those who judge the reservation of the Sacrament of Orders to men alone as discriminatory."

[Click here to read the full text of the visitation report.](#) [1]

"I am truly humbled, and a bit overwhelmed," Mother Millea said of her assignment. "While I have visited each of the communities and missions in my own congregation, the thought of gathering facts and findings about nearly 400 institutes across the United States can be daunting in scope."

"I am praying for all the sisters who will be a part of this Visitation, and hoping for their prayers both for the good of the process as well as for me in this role," she continued. "I ask the prayers of the American Catholic clergy and faithful too."

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