

Visitation to women religious meant to \"support\"

Dennis Coday | Feb. 6, 2009

Letters seeking meeting dates to be mailed soon

The two American women religious running the Vatican's apostolic visitation of women's apostolic communities in the United States are taking pains to describe the project as a positive effort to support congregations.

Speaking to *NCR* Friday (Feb. 6), Mother Clare Millea of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus said, \"We feel that transparency is the most important tool of this whole visitation. There's no reason to hide what we're looking for.\"

News of the visitation, which was announced a week ago, came as a surprise to most leaders in religious life.

The two major associations of women's congregations in the United States, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, received a fax announcing the visitation just a couple of hours before a news conference presenting the project to the world.

Speaking on background, leaders among American women's congregations who travel regularly to Rome to meet with Vatican officials -- including Cardinal Franc Rodé, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the office that ordered the visitation -- say that not once in these conversations did Rodé or anyone else offer a hint that a visitation might be in the works.

In the first phase of the visitation, superiors general of the roughly 400 women's congregations in the United States will receive letters from Rodé inviting them to contact Millea for a personal appointment. Millea said the idea is that these conversations will help formulate the issues to be addressed during the visitation.

She said the letters should go out at the beginning of next week.

The plan is for these meetings to begin immediately; Millea hopes to have them wrapped up by early August.

Millea said that an *Instrumentum laboris*, or \"working paper,\" for the visitation will be developed, as it was for the recent visitation of American seminaries and religious centers of formation. That document will lay out basic concerns and suggest a series of questions to be asked during visits.

Millea said that the plan is to release the *Instrumentum laboris* to the public, as was done with the seminary visitation.

The visitation team, which includes Illionis-based Sr. Eva-Maria Ackerman of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George, has a Web site, apostolicvisitation.org, with more information about the visitation and contact information for Millea and Ackerman.

Visit NCRonline.org for continued reporting on this developing story.

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