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Pope Francis to meet privately with international sisters

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 3, 2013
19th UISG assembly
Rome

Pope Francis is scheduled to have a private audience next week with the leadership group representing international women's congregations meeting in Rome for their triennial assembly, the group announced Friday.

About 800 of nearly 2,000 members of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) are meeting in Rome through Wednesday. They will meet privately with Pope Francis before his regular Wednesday general audience.

Leaders of the sisters' group, which announced the meeting with the pope at a pre-assembly meeting Friday, could not recall the last time a pope had met with their general membership.

Pope Benedict XVI canceled an audience scheduled for the group during their last assembly, held in Rome in May 2010, because of preparations for his visit to Portugal the same month.

Pope Francis' decision to meet with the group is "a sign of hope, of interest for women religious," said Sr. Maria Theresa Hoernemann, a native German who serves on the sisters' group's executive board.

The meeting, Hoernemann said, was arranged on short notice following the pope's election in March.

Given the short time frame, "it would be very easy for him to say it's too late, but instead, he said, 'I have intent to meet the superiors of women's congregations," said Hoernemann, who also serves in Rome as the superior general of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, an international congregation.

News of the pope's upcoming meeting with women religious may be of increased significance in the United States, where the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has ordered the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) to revise and place itself under the authority of three bishops.

Several former leaders of LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of U.S. Catholic sisters, expressed pain and disappointment [1] in April when a Vatican press release said Pope Francis "reaffirmed" the doctrinal congregation's move [2], initially made under Pope Benedict.

One leader of American sisters in Rome for the international meeting said she took news of UISG's meeting with the pope as a positive sign.

"I'm delighted and grateful that we will have a private audience with him because to me it shows his affection for and confidence in the American sisters," said Charity Sr. Joan Cook, superior general of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

"Not only the American sisters, but for me as an American, that is what it means," Cook said. "I would say also it shows his gratitude for and confidence in women religious all around the world, in our life and in the service

that we perform."

Formed after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the International Union of Superiors General is a canonically recognized representative body of women religious that promotes mutual exchange and collaboration among the numerous congregations.

The union has an office in Rome, and its membership includes leaders of any Catholic order of sisters that wishes to join.

Wednesday's meeting with Pope Francis is one of several times the group will have contact with Vatican officials during the assembly. On Sunday, they are scheduled to meet with Cardinal Joao Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Vatican congregation responsible for overseeing members of religious institutes.

Aviz has headed that congregation since 2011, when he replaced Cardinal Franc Rodé. Rodé did not attend the May 2010 meeting of the sisters' group, saying he would be out of town for another event.

The theme for the sisters' meeting this year is "It will not be so among you: The service of leadership according to the Gospel," taken from the account in the Gospel of Matthew of Jesus telling the apostles James and John to lead as servants, not masters.

Among events scheduled for the assembly is a presentation from Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, superior general of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi in St. Francis, Wis. Deacon also serves as president of LCWR and is expected to speak about LCWR's situation with the Vatican's doctrinal congregation.

Sisters from different parts of the world will give talks on a range of topics, including biblical authority, efforts to stem human trafficking, and continuing attempts for collaboration between congregations of sisters in different areas of the world.

The meeting is also an important time for sisters to talk to one another and learn together, said U.S. Dominican Sr. Margaret Ormond.

"People come from all over," Ormond, the prioress of the Ohio-based Dominican Sisters of Peace, said in a phone interview with *NCR* April 25. "It's an exciting, wonderful opportunity to learn from each other."

Among key questions Ormond said she was asking as she prepared for the assembly was how sisters "fit into the church."

"What is our role and how can it be strengthened?" she asked. "How can it be at the service of the poor?"

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