

Sisters grasp the extended hand

Thomas C. Fox | May. 6, 2013

19th UISG assembly

Commentary Rome

Some 800 global women religious leaders, gathered Sunday under the umbrella of the International Union of Superiors General, witnessed what some described as an unusual, hopeful moment in the torturous saga of Vatican-women religious affairs.

It happened in the form of a visit from Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, prefect at the Congregation for Religious, to the UISG gathering. Unlike his predecessor, Cardinal Franc Rode, who was a complete no-show when the assembly convened here three years ago, Braz de Aviz made himself available, spending [much of a day](#) [1] at the conference, celebrating a Mass, offering reflections on the readings, and later answering questions put to him by the women and the media.

During his time at the assembly the cardinal displayed an openness and showed a comfort level not often seen when Catholic prelates come into contact with bright women. By day's end more than a few of the women were breathing more easily, saying they have a friend in the Congregation for Religious.

Some described the cardinal from Brazil as a man with a "big heart."

But what seemed to bond Braz de Aviz and the women most of all was his willingness to treat them with attentive respect, as equals. In so doing he added flesh to his call for greater intra-church cooperation. Braz de Aviz specifically called for collaboration between ministries, between hierarchy and prophetic ministry.

As he spoke he displayed a rich humanity, grounded in his seeming ability to take a risk and be grilled by many disaffected critics. He willingly shared his own vulnerability as well as personal hurt experienced at the hands of his fellow cardinal colleagues.

He told the story of learning he had been left out of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's doctrinal assessment of LCWR. As head of the church group most affected by the findings, it was quite a blow, causing him, he said, "much pain."

He stressed, "We have to change this way of doing things." While his remarks were aimed at Vatican prelates, the women seemed to hear that change needed to include them as well.

As Braz de Aviz, sitting with women at his sides spoke of a dysfunctional and unchristian working environment the women nodded, knowing well they have been the victims of this breakdown in civility.

In the eyes of some, Braz de Aviz did not adequately answer all the questions put to him. He seemed to underplay the negative impact of the apostolic visitation in the U.S. congregations. He said the report is on the pope's desk without offering information or opinion on the subject. He might not have fully grasped the urgency of righting the LCWR injustices.

However, many women agreed they had witnessed a rare happening. They had seen a Vatican prelate who had come to them and had treated them seriously in a climate of appreciation and respect.

In the larger context of long strained male-female, clergy-religious tensions and misunderstandings, the Braz de Aviz visit might, in the end, not amount to much.

On the other hand, it was both a sign of good intent and a step into greater communications. These are no small matters.

The women will [meet Wednesday](#) [2] in a private audience with Pope Francis. They are hoping it will allow a two-way conversation, though that is not yet part of the published format. One never knows. Maybe something mirroring what happened with Braz de Aviz and the women could happen again. If so, the course of our church would likely be altered for the better. Many women said they think that gaining a papal ear could make a difference. Short of that, there's still widespread fear that Braz de Aviz' noble actions, however welcomed, will not have been enough.

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