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The Vatican and U.S. women religious

Richard McBrien | Jul. 6, 2009 Essays in Theology

I did not intend to comment on the Vatican's decision late last year to conduct a visitation of religious communities of women in the United States because I expected such a study, to be done under the auspices of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, to come up more or less empty-handed as did the Vatican's earlier study of U.S. seminaries and theologates.

I may, of course, hear from some seminary quarters itemizing a few of the negative results of that previous study. I would welcome such input and would want to assure the sources in advance of complete confidentiality.

I experienced a change-of-mind about the study of women religious in the United States, however, when I learned earlier this year that the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has initiated a doctrinal investigation of the Leadership of Conference of Women Reli-gious, referred to as the LCWR, the largest of its kind in North America.

In light of previous statements made about religious life by the cardinal-prefect of the Vatican congregation, Cardinal Franc Rodé, one has reason to wonder how objective and dispassionate the visitation of religious communities of women in the United States will be.

According to a report posted by Neil W. McCabe for *The Boston Pilot* (2/13/09), the weekly newspaper of the archdiocese of Boston, Rodé delivered the keynote address at a symposium on religious life at Stonehill College in North Easton, Massachusetts, in late September.

In that address the cardinal pointed out that religious orders that stressed the continuity of Vatican II with the authentic tradition of the church did not suffer the same crisis in vocations as those that interpreted the council's changes as a rupture from that Tradition.

I know of no religious community, of women or of men, that interpreted the changes brought about by Vatican II as a "rupture" from the tradition of the church. Nor did the cardinal name any. We are dealing here with a classic case of setting up a "straw man" (or, in this instance, a "straw woman") and then easily knocking it over.

The Rodé listed four distinct approaches to religious life today: new communities that bring energy to old traditions, older communities that have revived their traditions, and older commu-nities that have, according to *The Boston Pilot*, simply accepted their decline and have acquiesced. Again, no examples were given, especially for the third approach.

Rodé described his fourth approach in even more ominous terms. He claimed that "there are those who have opted for ways that take them outside communion with Christ in the Catholic church, although they themselves may have opted to 'stay' in the Church physically."

At least the cardinal did not say that such communities have remained in the Catholic Church only because they know that they can do more harm to the Church from the inside than from the outside. This very charge was

made some years ago in a classroom lecture by a professor at The Catholic University of America with reference to the English Catholic layman, Lord Acton.

Nonetheless, Rodé's was a serious allegation and should not have been made without evidence. Perhaps it is expected that such "evidence" will be gathered during the course of the visitation of religious communities of women in the United States and in the CDF's investigation of the LCWR.

At the conclusion of *The Boston Pilot* story there is a brief comment by Sr. Sandra Schneiders, IHM, professor at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif. "Visitations," she pointed out, "do not drop out of heaven newborn. They come about because somebody wants to investigate somebody."

She also described as a red herring the Vatican's concern for a decline in religious vocations as a major reason for the visitation. She insisted that the decline in the number of women religious follows the demographic trends for the greater female population.

Until recently, Schneiders observed, the majority of women have been under the age of 25, and this was the pool from which the church drew vocations. More importantly, there are now increased career opportunities for women.

One could say the same about the decline in vocations to the priesthood. Today there are increased career opportunities for young men, many of whom, in the 1950s and earlier, aspired to be policemen, firemen, FBI agents, or, in the case of some, priests.

Relatively few Catholic males had the financial wherewithal to study at the college or university levels to become doctors, lawyers, or business leaders. That situation has changed dramatically in recent decades.

More next week.

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