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Vatican document on brotherhood still in the works

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 19, 2011

Archbishop Joseph W. Tobin (CNS/Paul Haring)

The Vatican is legendary for thinking in centuries, which may help explain why a document on the vocation to the religious brotherhood that in some ways has been in the works for a quarter century remains largely in the planning stages today.

When that document from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, better known as the Congregation for Religious, eventually appears, certainly no one can accuse them of having rushed into it.

Archbishop Joseph Tobin, an American and former superior of the Redemptorist order who today serves as the secretary of the congregation, told *NCR* in early September that the document has had a long gestation.

Way back in 1985, the Congregation for Religious held a plenary assembly, meaning a full meeting of its members, dedicated to the topic of the brotherhood. At the time, the thinking was that the brotherhood was ripe for a new theological analysis, particularly since 1985 marked the 20th anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Under Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, who served as the congregation?s prefect from 2005 to early 2011, there was a push to revive the topic. Tobin said a document went through several drafts, but none was fully satisfactory, and so it was sent back for revision. At this point, he said, it?s impossible to predict when it might be finished.

Whenever it appears, Tobin said the document will not offer an empirical study of the brotherhood, but rather a theological reflection on the nature of the vocation.

Despite the delay, Tobin said the subject of the brotherhood remains of vital interest.

?It is a glimpse of male religious life in its ?pure? form,? Tobin said, ?untainted by clericalism or eclipsed by the demands of ordained ministry.?

Furthermore, Tobin said, the first male religious were ?brothers,? in the sense of not being ordained priests. He suggested that a reflection on the brotherhood helps male religious get back to their roots.

According to official Vatican statistics, there are roughly 55,000 religious brothers in the world today, including just under 10,000 in the United States, Canada, and Central America. In the United States, the Religious Brothers Conference (www.todaysbrother.com), headquartered in Chicago and founded in the wake of Vatican II, acts as an advocate for the identity and vocation to the brotherhood.

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