

Vatican must hear 'anger and hurt' of American nuns, official says

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Created Dec 07, 2010

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ROME -- Rome must acknowledge the “depth of anger and hurt” provoked by a visitation of American nuns, the Vatican’s number two official for religious life has said, saying it illustrates the need for a “strategy of reconciliation” with women religious.

Archbishop Joseph Tobin, Secretary of the Vatican’s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, said that he does not expect any “punitive” fallout from the visitation, and that before any decisions are made, women’s communities should have a chance to know the results and to respond.

That addresses a central concern of many women religious, who have objected to what some perceive as the secrecy of the process. Tobin said that as a matter of “justice and charity,” he will “strongly advocate” for feedback and a right of reply.

Tobin’s comments on the visitation came in a Dec. 6 interview with *NCR* in Rome.

Announced in early 2009, the visitation is currently in “phase three”, meaning on-site visits to selected congregations. The aim is for reports to be delivered to the Vatican throughout 2011, marking the formal end of the process.

Mother Clare Millea, an American who serves as Superior General of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is heading up the visitation on the Vatican’s behalf.

Tobin, 58, is also an American who grew up in Detroit, and who served two terms as Superior General of the Redemptorist order prior to his Vatican appointment in August. He’s been in his new job since September -- a position in which Tobin will likely play a key role in shaping the Vatican’s response to Millea’s reports.

A fuller version of the interview with Tobin will appear in Friday’s “All Things Catholic” column, including reflections on the state of religious life in various parts of the world, and some discoveries about the internal culture of the Vatican.

The following are the portions of the Dec. 6 interview which concern the visitation of women religious in the United States.

So far, have you worked much on the visitation of American women religious?

I wouldn’t say it’s a daily issue in the dicastery, because there are so many other ones, some of which may be more urgent in a local area. But [the visitation] is certainly there. I met Mother Millea last month and had a chance to hear her experience. I’ve also met with different people, such as the past president of the LCWR and other American religious who are passing through Rome.

I’m picking up the impression that it’s not as bad as people thought it was going to be, but there still is a need for a strategy of reconciliation.

What do you mean by that?

A number of leaders of women's congregations have said to me that they've been surprised by the depth of anger and hurt that exists among the sisters. I think that can't be ignored. It has to be addressed, it's a sign of the times.

Do you have a sense at this stage of how to address it?

I think it would be arrogant on my part to say that. I remember talking to a couple of sisters, and I said, 'Look, I'm not naive enough to think that trust can be built overnight, or even through a nice meeting, but at least we've got to talk.'

I also don't think the answer is just with me. I think my dicastery and others have to hear the experience of women religious, and women religious too have to hear the experience of pastors and this dicastery. We have to try to heal what can be healed.

Your office won't be seeing any reports from the visitation until next year?

That's right. Everything so far has been oral.

Is it therefore too early to talk about what the end-game might be?

Yes, although I can say that I would be very surprised if anybody would purport to give any punitive or overly prescriptive norms as a result of this visitation. If the visitors, in dialogue with the sisters, have identified some specific issues that need to be dealt with, okay. But forcing people into habits or something like that? That's not what this is about.

There's another side to this, which is that if anybody needed to be convinced of the complexity of the United States, just do an apostolic visit! There are stereotypes of Americans in the air sometimes, and there's a risk of falling victim to those stereotypes among people who don't know the country.

In other words, this visitation could be a learning experience for Rome as well?

Sure, that's what I'm saying.

You don't anticipate that the visitation is going to trigger an earthquake in women's religious life in America?

No, I don't. I think that would be really disrespectful of what women religious in America have accomplished. Anyway, earthquakes in religious life generally don't work out very well. Pope Clement XIV suppressed the Jesuits, for example, and in retrospect that wasn't a very good idea!

We're not likely to see anything like that?

No.

One source of concern often expressed by women religious is that they're not going to see the results of the visitation or have any opportunity to respond. What can you say about that?

I really believe that people have a right to some sort of response. I don't want to do Mother Millea's job, in the sense of sitting here in Rome and contradicting instructions she's received. But I can say that my experience of visitations, having done them for 18 years in seventy countries, is that there always is feedback ... always. That's a respectful part of the dialogue, and it also makes sure that the visitation isn't a flash in the pan, or what's worse, some sort of trauma that's unresolved. You don't want people to feel like they've been punched but they don't know what it was all about.

Your intention is that people will get some kind of feedback?

Yes. All my experience tells me that's the way to go. I don't want to subvert the visitation teams by proclaiming something in an interview, but I will strongly advocate for feedback.

The concern is not just feedback, but also the opportunity for response. If somebody feels that something has been reported to you which doesn't accurately reflect the reality of their community, will they have an opportunity to respond?

First of all, people write to this dicastery all the time. They're free to do that.

Of course, that presumes people know what's being said about them. Some sisters worry that you're getting a secret indictment about them, and that you're going to make policy decisions based on that, without them ever knowing it.

That may be a perception, I wouldn't deny that. I've heard people question the motivation for this visitation, the appropriateness of it, but I've not yet heard anybody say that the visitors were unfair.

But of course no one has seen the final work product of those visitors. Can you assure people that if a visit identifies a problem in a community, that community will have a chance to respond before policy decisions are made?

Oh, yes. I think justice and charity would dictate that. We also have to be humble and acknowledge that sometimes you get the wrong impression. At the end of our visitations with the Redemptorists, before we went back to Rome we would meet with the provincial council and say, 'This is what we saw. Does that sound anything like your province, or does it sound like the province from Mars?' If it's the province from Mars, we haven't done a very good job and we have to do it again. People would either say, 'That's about right,' or they would say, 'Wait a minute ... how many people said that?' If the visitor said, 'we heard it from a couple,' they might respond, 'That's probably not a universal opinion.'

That's a long way of saying that before concrete decisions are going to be made, the accuracy of the perceptions has to be tested.

There is also a parallel review of the LCWR being conducted through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Do you have any involvement with that?

No, and I've not heard anything about it other than what I've read. There's been no communication with me about that visitation.

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