

Doctrinal congregation: Small Vatican office has broad reach

VATICAN CITY - As two recent documents illustrate, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith keeps an eye on almost everything coming out of the Vatican.

Although it has fewer than 50 employees, including ushers and receptionists, whatever any Vatican office does or says having to do with faith and morals is a matter that falls under the congregation's gaze.

As the heir of the Holy Office of the Inquisition - and housed in a building still known as the Palace of the Holy Office - the congregation often is portrayed as an agency almost exclusively dedicated to seeking out errant theologians and condemning their writings.

The congregation does review books that bishops' conferences bring to its attention, especially if the book presents itself as explaining Catholic morals or doctrine and is widely used in schools of theology or seminaries.

But since Pope Benedict XVI was elected in 2005 and U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada was appointed to succeed him as the congregation's prefect, the office has issued only one formal public criticism of written works: a notification about two books by a liberation theologian, Jesuit Father Jon Sobrino.

More and more, the congregation's pronouncements involve the application of Catholic moral teaching to questions concerning the very beginning and very end of human life. Biotechnology, the use of human embryos, politics and abortion, euthanasia and the care of the dying all have been topics of recent documents.

In early May, the Vatican published two documents signed by Cardinal Levada that demonstrate just how widespread the congregation's reach is.

An instruction released May 13 called on bishops and pastors to respond generously to Catholics who want to attend Mass celebrated according to the 1962 Roman Missal, commonly known as the Tridentine rite.

And a circular letter released May 16 ordered every bishops' conference in the world to prepare guidelines for dealing with accusations of clerical sexual abuse and for ensuring the protection of children.

Formally, the instruction on the Mass came from the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei, which oversees the pastoral care of Catholics who have a special devotion to the older liturgy. Pope Benedict placed the commission under the doctrinal congregation in 2009.

The letter on clerical sexual abuse reflects the fact that the largest section of the doctrinal congregation – its disciplinary section – is charged with coordinating efforts to rid the church of sexual abuse and with monitoring or conducting cases against individual abusers.

In addition to sexual abuse of minors, the disciplinary section deals with “the most serious crimes committed in the celebration of the sacraments,” particularly the Eucharist and confession, examines “crimes against the faith – heresy, schism and apostasy – and, finally, evaluates cases of alleged apparitions, visions and messages with a presumed supernatural origin,” according to a description in the annual report, “Activity of the Holy See.”

The international commission of bishops and theologians appointed in March to study the alleged Marian apparitions in Medjugorje, for example, is working under the auspices of the doctrinal congregation.

The disciplinary section also coordinates “the admission of former non-Catholic ministers to the priesthood and other similar questions,” the book said.

Under the provisions of Pope Benedict's 2009 apostolic constitution, the doctrinal congregation is charged with establishing special structures for former Anglicans entering full communion with the Roman Catholic Church while preserving aspects of their Anglican spiritual and liturgical heritage.

The structures, known as “personal ordinariates” are similar to dioceses. The first was established in England in January and there was widespread speculation that a U.S. ordinariate would be announced before July.

Cardinal Levada and the four dozen people who work each day in the Holy Office aren't doing all that work alone. The congregation has 25 cardinal and bishop members and 28 consulting theologians.

Most of the consultants are professors at pontifical universities in Rome and they get together at the congregation three times a month to offer their expert opinions and share their research on questions the congregation considers pressing.

More comprehensive, long-term studies are carried out by two other commissions that answer to the doctrinal congregation. The Pontifical Biblical Commission currently is conducting a study on "inspiration and truth" in the Bible. And the International Theological Commission is working on three topics: the principles, meaning and methods of theology; belief in one God and its implications for relations among Jews, Christians and Muslims; and ways to better integrate Catholic social teaching into Catholic teaching in general.

Every Wednesday, the cardinal and bishop members who are in Rome gather around a conference table to review issues and make decisions. And, each Friday evening, Cardinal Levada meets personally with Pope Benedict to discuss what's going on.

The weekly meetings are important given the congregation's broad reach. Virtually every office or agency that belongs to the Roman Curia deals with something doctrinal, at least occasionally.