

Head of apostolic visitation expresses 'sadness' over slow response

WASHINGTON - The nun who is overseeing the Vatican-mandated apostolic visitation of U.S. communities of women religious has expressed "sadness and disappointment" over congregations that have resisted completing the questionnaire that is part of the process.

The apostolic visitation was initiated by Cardinal Franc Rode, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Announced Jan. 30, 2009, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, the apostolic visitation process was opened "in order to look into the quality of life" of U.S. congregations of women religious.

The study covers nearly all of the country's 67,000 sisters. Only those nuns who live in cloisters are exempt.

In a letter dated Jan. 12 and addressed to women religious, Mother Mary Clare Millea - who is overseeing the study of 341 congregations as apostolic visitor - reported on her recent trip to Rome, her visit with Cardinal Rode and her concerns about the response to the questionnaire. She urged those who have not responded to do so.

"The cardinal was pleased to hear about the wholehearted and genuine responses of many congregations to the questionnaire," said Mother Clare, who is superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. "However, I also shared with him my sadness and disappointment that not all congregations have responded to this phase of dialogue with the church in a manner fully supportive of the purpose and goals of the apostolic visitation.

"He encouraged me to ask those who have not yet fully complied to prayerfully reconsider their response. I take this opportunity, then, to once again invite all

major superiors who have not responded fully to the questionnaire to do so," she added.

In a Jan. 27 e-mail to Catholic News Service, Mother Clare said her intent in the letter was to "invite those who responded inadequately" to re-evaluate their response to the questionnaire and the apostolic visitation process.

"More than just an obligation, cooperation with the apostolic visitation may be viewed as an opportunity and a privileged means for religious to share their hopes, strengths and struggles," she said.

Last year the announcement of the visitation took many religious communities by surprise and was met with numerous questions about its purpose. Little information about what prompted the Vatican congregation to order the study and why the U.S. was singled out was released at the time of its announcement.

About 10 months later Cardinal Rode said on Vatican Radio that the investigation was a response to concerns regarding "some irregularities or omissions in American religious life. Most of all, you could say, it involves a certain secular mentality that has spread in these religious families and perhaps, also a certain 'feminist' spirit."

Some nuns have told the news media they are distrustful of the visitation and don't intend to fully cooperate with the investigation.

Franciscan Sister Elizabeth Ohmann, who works for a lobbying group called Humane Borders, told the Arizona Daily Star that she believes the Vatican is targeting congregations that disagree with some aspects of Catholic teaching, particularly on sexuality.

An online discussion group has been started on Yahoo where women religious who "see the value and necessity of the apostolic visitation at this time in this country" can communicate with each other, anonymously if they wish.

The visits - slated to begin this spring - will mark the start of the third phase of the apostolic visitation.

The second phase began in September 2009, when questionnaires were sent to the

religious communities. The orders had until Nov. 20 to respond, but responses continued to be received at the visitation office in Hamden, Conn., in December, Mother Clare wrote in an e-mail to CNS.

The three-part questionnaire sought information related to congregational membership, living arrangements, the ministries in which members participate, spiritual life, including the practice of prayer and the frequency of Mass attendance, and the promotion of vocations.

After concerns were raised by several congregations about the information being requested in one part of the questionnaire, Mother Clare, with the approval of Cardinal Rode, decided to drop three questions, covering membership, financial data and properties the congregations owned or sponsored.

Completed questionnaires go to the apostolic visitation office in Hamden, Conn., and the answers will be used to determine which religious communities will be visited by teams of apostolic representatives this spring.

Sister Mary Waskowiak, president of the Maryland-based Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, told The Associated Press that several sisters told her they left some sections of the questionnaire blank, and others said they just sent the Vatican copies of their constitutions.

Once the study concludes in mid-2011, a confidential report will be sent to Cardinal Rode, but its findings will not be made public, Mother Clare said.