

Nuns discuss Vatican visitation of US religious orders on NPR show

WASHINGTON – Mother Mary Quentin Sheridan, superior general of the Religious Sisters of Mercy in Michigan, said she sees nothing wrong with the Vatican checking in on women's religious communities in the United States.

"In my opinion there is nothing unusual about it. Perhaps it is infrequent, but with every organization evaluation is essential," she said about a Vatican-ordered evaluation of communities. "There is a presumption that our freedom has somehow been usurped; I cannot agree with that."

Another U.S. nun, Sister Sandra Schneiders of Berkeley, Calif., said she was more surprised than anything by the announcement of the apostolic visitation.

"There was no consultation at all about this investigation, there are no allegations against sisters, there was no communication, so this came as a complete surprise," she said. "So quite literally these are not only uninvited but unexpected guests."

Mother Mary Quentin and Sister Sandra, a Sister, Servant of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, made their comments about the apostolic visitation during a July 8 broadcast of National Public Radio's "On Point" program.

Host Tom Ashbrook spoke with the sisters as well as a national religion correspondent for The New York Times about what the visitation may mean.

The Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life announced in late January that it had organized an apostolic visitation to examine the life of women's religious communities in the United States.

Ashbrook said some have termed it "an inquisition" and others have said the evaluation is simply a responsibility of the Vatican.

Mother Mary Quentin said nuns are going through an interesting time in the United States and their freedom has blessed them with many gifts. However, the

interpretation of their duties may be too broad for the Catholic Church and may not be in alignment with the meaning of the Second Vatican Council's decree on the renewal of religious life.

She said women religious must follow their constitutions, and urged them not to confuse their freedom with their responsibilities.

Sister Sandra, who teaches New Testament studies and spirituality at the Jesuit Theology School at Berkeley, acknowledged the enormous changes that have come about in religious life and that some of those changes may raise questions. She added that there have always been those who choose to reject religious life.

"Could a Catholic get to the point where they just say, 'I don't see myself as a Catholic anymore'? Yes, so do people move that way? Sure, many people have chosen to move away," Sister Sandra said.

She said she did not think it was the Vatican's place to judge those who choose to leave religious life or to limit nuns so they cannot have their own ideas.

"You can't tell people they can't think, they can't read, they can't discuss," Sister Sandra said. "If that leads people outside of the religious life they started in, we have to respect that."

Times reporter Laurie Goodstein said there has been some speculation the apostolic visitation may have something to do with the decline in the number of Catholic schools across the country, because of the decline of the number of nuns teaching in those schools.

Another theory is that the Vatican may be looking at the possibility of shutting down some of the orders and consolidating them for economic reasons, she said.

Beyond those possibilities, Goodstein said that based on her reporting she believes the Vatican is concerned about nuns taking on responsibilities that may take them away from the church.

Ashbrook took calls from listeners during the program. One of the callers said nuns needed to be given space to continue fostering a relationship with God, while

another said he had full faith in the competence and mission of nuns in the United States.

Callers also shared an appreciation for nuns and their work and said there would be a hole to fill if the Vatican ordered nuns to return to more traditional ministry.

Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is the apostolic visitator charged by the Vatican with directing the comprehensive study.

She told Catholic News Service in a June 17 phone interview from the apostolic visitation office in Hamden, Conn., that she hoped to gather up to 150 names of people who will begin visiting a cross section of congregations starting next spring. She said the visits will encompass a wide variety of orders.