

American nuns remain among the most ardent supporters of the Catholic Church of the Second Vatican Council. It is, therefore, no wonder that the hierarchy feels threatened enough to conduct “sweeping investigations.”

Nuns in the U.S. Are Facing Scrutiny by the Vatican

LAURIE GOODSTEIN
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The Vatican is quietly conducting two sweeping investigations of American nuns, a development that has startled and dismayed nuns who fear they are the targets of a doctrinal inquisition.

Nuns were the often-unsung workers who helped build the Roman Catholic Church in this country, planting schools and hospitals and keeping parishes humming. But for the last three decades, their numbers have been declining — to 60,000 today from 180,000 in 1965.

While some nuns say they are grateful that the Vatican is finally paying attention to their dwindling communities, many fear that the real motivation is to reel in American nuns who have reinterpreted their calling for the modern world.

In the last four decades since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, many American nuns stopped wearing religious habits, left convents to live independently and went into new lines of work: academia and other professions, social and political advocacy and grass-roots organizations that serve the poor or promote spirituality. A few nuns have also been active in organizations that advocate changes in the church like ordaining women and married men as priests.

Some sisters surmise that the Vatican and even some American bishops are trying to shift them back into living in convents, wearing habits or at least identifiable religious garb, ordering their schedules around daily prayers and working primarily in Roman Catholic institutions, like schools and hospitals.

“They think of us as an ecclesiastical work force,” said Sister Sandra M. Schneiders, professor emerita of New Testament and spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, in California. “Whereas we are religious, we’re living the life of total dedication to Christ, and out of that flows a profound concern for the good of all humanity. So our vision of our lives, and their vision of us as a work force, are just not on the same planet.”

The more extensive of the two investigations is called an Apostolic Visitation, and the Vatican has provided only a vague rationale for it: to “look into the quality of the life” of women’s religious institutes. The visitation is being conducted by Mother Mary Clare Millea, an apple-cheeked American with a black habit and smiling eyes, who is the superior general of her order, the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and lives in Rome.

In an interview in a formal sitting room at her order's United States headquarters in Hamden, Conn., Mother Clare said she had already met one-on-one with 127 superiors general of women's orders, many in that room but also in Chicago, Los Angeles, Rome and St. Louis. She is preparing questionnaires to send to each congregation of women and recruiting teams of investigators, mostly nuns and some priests, who will make visits to congregations that she selects. The visitation focuses only on nuns actively engaged in working in society and the church, not cloistered, contemplative nuns.

Mother Clare's task is to prepare a confidential report to the Vatican on the state of each of about 340 qualified congregations of nuns in the United States, as well as a summary with her recommendations, all of which she hopes to complete by mid-2011.

The investigation was ordered by Cardinal Franc Rodé, head of the Vatican office that deals with religious orders. In a speech in Massachusetts last year, Cardinal Rodé offered barbed criticism of some American nuns "who have opted for ways that take them outside" the church.

Given this backdrop, Sister Schneiders, the professor in Berkeley, urged her fellow sisters not to cooperate with the visitation, saying the investigators should be treated as "uninvited guests who should be received in the parlor, not given the run of the house." She wrote this in a private e-mail message to a few friends, but it became public and was widely circulated.

Mother Clare said she was aware that some women's institutes "weren't happy" to hear of the visitation, but that so far about 55 percent had responded in person or in writing.

"It's an opportunity for us to re-evaluate ourselves, to make our reality known and also to be challenged to live authentically who we say we are," she said.

Each congregation of nuns will be evaluated based on how well they are "living in fidelity" both to their congregation's own internal norms and constitution, and to the church's guidelines for religious life, Mother Clare said. For instance, if a congregation's stated mission is to serve youth, are the nuns doing that? If they do not live in a convent, are they attending Mass and keeping the sacraments? Are their superiors exercising adequate supervision?

"There's no intention to make us all identical," she said.

Church historians said that the Vatican usually ordered an apostolic visitation when a particular institution had gone seriously astray. In the wake of the priest sexual-abuse scandal, the Vatican ordered a visitation of American seminaries. It is now conducting a visitation of the Legionaries of Christ, a men's order whose founder, the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, sexually abused young seminarians, fathered a child and was accused of financial improprieties. He died in 2008.

But the investigation of American nuns surprised many because there was no obvious precipitating cause.

Sister Janice Farnham, a part-time professor of church history at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, said, "Why are the U.S. sisters being singled out, when

women religious in other countries are struggling with many issues about the quality of their lives, in the Church and in their societies?”

The visitation could result in some communities of nuns' being ordered to make changes, but judging from how the Vatican handled previous visitations, those consequences may never become public.

The second investigation of nuns is a doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an umbrella organization that claims 1,500 members from about 95 percent of women's religious orders. This investigation was ordered by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is headed by an American, Cardinal William Levada.

Cardinal Levada sent a letter to the Leadership Conference saying an investigation was warranted because it appeared that the organization had done little since it was warned eight years ago that it had failed to “promote” the church's teachings on three issues: the male-only priesthood, homosexuality and the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church as the means to salvation.

The letter goes on to say that, “Given both the tenor and the doctrinal content of various addresses” at assemblies the Leadership Conference has held in recent years, the problem has not been fixed.

The Leadership Conference drew the Vatican's wrath decades ago when its president welcomed Pope John Paul II to the United States with a plea for the ordination of women. But several nuns who have attended the group's meetings in recent years said they had not heard anything that would provoke the Vatican's ire.

Officers of the Leadership Conference refused interview requests, but said in an e-mail message that they had one meeting in late May with the investigators, Bishop Leonard P. Blair, of the Diocese of Toledo, and Msgr. Charles Brown from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican, who voiced the Vatican's concerns. (Bishop Blair declined to comment). In the fall, they said, they will meet again to respond to the concerns.

“We are looking forward to clarifying some misperceptions,” Sister J. Lora Dambroski, president of the Leadership Conference, said in the e-mail message.

Besides these two investigations, another decree that affected some nuns was issued in March by the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The bishops said that Catholics should stop practicing Reiki, a healing therapy that is used in some Catholic hospitals and retreat centers, and which was enthusiastically adopted by many nuns. The bishops said Reiki is both unscientific and non-Christian.

Nuns practicing reiki and running church reform groups may have finally proved too much for the church's male hierarchy, said Kenneth Briggs, the author of “Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns,” (Doubleday Religion, 2006).

Mr. Briggs said of the various investigations: "For some in the leadership circles in Rome and elsewhere, it's a piece of unfinished business. It's an effort to bring about a re-establishment of a very traditional, very conservative set of standards for what convent life is supposed to be."

President Obama extends an invitation to a range of Catholic voices to prep him for his trip to the Vatican.

Obama Reaches Out Before Vatican Trip

By Jacqueline L. Salmon
Washington Post
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President Barack Obama said today that he still favors a "robust" federal policy protecting health-care workers who have moral objections to performing some procedures even though he plans to roll back a Bush administration rule that expanded such protection.

Speaking to eight religion reporters at the White House before his first meeting with Pope Benedict XVI next Friday, Obama sought to reassure Catholic health-care workers that they would not be forced to perform abortions and other procedures that violate the Church's teachings. Obama said he is a "believer in conscience clauses" and supports a new policy that would "certainly not be weaker" than the rules in place before the expansion late in President George W. Bush's administration.

Obama's comments were part of a broad interview that touched on issues including his hopes for his meeting with the pontiff, abortion and his struggle to choose a home church for him and his family.

Obama's trip to the Vatican will coincide with his participation in the Group of Eight summit, a meeting of leaders of major industrial nations, Wednesday to next Friday.

Obama said he hopes his meeting with the pope will lead to cooperation in several areas -- including Mideast peace, poverty, climate change and immigration -- in which he said Benedict has shown "extraordinary leadership."

But even though the two have areas of "deep agreement . . . there are going to be some areas where we've got some disagreements," the president added in the 45-minute session in the Roosevelt Room. Those areas include abortion rights and embryonic stem cell research, which Obama supports but the Church says violate its teachings.

Several federal laws that have been in force since the 1970s protect health-care workers who do not want to participate in abortion and other procedures they find morally objectionable. The Bush administration said the new policy was designed to ensure those laws were enforced.

Shortly after taking office, Obama announced plans to roll back the Bush conscience-clause policy, which cut off federal funding for thousands of state and local governments,

hospitals, health plans, clinics and other entities if they did not accommodate health-care workers who refused to participate in procedures they felt violated their personal, moral or religious beliefs. Critics of the Bush rule said it greatly expanded the types of people in the medical field who could object to procedures and the scope of health care covered by the protection.

The Health and Human Services Department is reviewing hundreds of thousands of public comments it received in response to the Obama administration's proposal.

Obama's plans have led to fears among Catholic health-care providers that they would be forced to perform abortions, sterilizations and other procedures that violate Church teachings despite federal laws protecting their right to refuse.

Obama said the new policy "may not meet the criteria of every possible critic of our approach, but it certainly will not be weaker than what existed before the changes were made."

Yesterday, a group representing Catholic health-care organizations welcomed the president's remarks, noting his use of the word "robust."

"That's the kind of statement from the White House that gratifies and reassures us," said Sister Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association, which represents 1,600 Catholic hospitals and other health-care institutions.

Some conservative critics, however, dismissed the comments.

"Robust sounds good, but what does it mean?" said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, which supports the Bush protections. "Without them, it is meaningless."

Obama also addressed his administration's Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, which has been negotiating between players on both sides of the abortion debate, seeking to find areas on which they can agree. However, the groups have clashed over the administration's desire to include funding for comprehensive sex education and contraception in any legislative package.

Yesterday, Obama said he recognized that this would contradict Catholic Church doctrine, "so I would not expect someone who feels very strongly about this issue as a matter of religious faith to be able to agree with me on that, but that's my personal view. We may not be able to arrive at perfectly compatible language on that front."

Staff writer Rob Stein contributed to this report.

Vatican should learn from Galileo mess, prelate says

The following article was written by Philip Pullela and edited by Sonya Hepinstall.

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VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - The Catholic Church should not fear scientific progress and possibly repeat the mistake it made when it condemned astronomer Galileo in the 17th century, a Vatican official said on Thursday in a rare self-criticism.

Galileo, who lived from 1564 to 1642, was condemned by the Inquisition in 1633 for asserting that the earth revolved around the sun.

Known as the father of astronomy, he wasn't fully rehabilitated by the Vatican until 1992, nearly 360 years later.

At a news conference presenting a new volume of documents on the Galileo case, Monsignor Sergio Pagano, head of the Vatican's secret archives, said today's Church and Vatican officials can learn from past mistakes and shed their diffidence toward science.

"Can this teach us something today? I certainly think so," he said, in a rare display of self-criticism for the Vatican.

"We should be careful, when we read the Sacred Scriptures and have to deal with scientific questions, to not make the same mistake now that was made then," he said.

"I am thinking of stem cells, I am thinking of eugenics, I am thinking of scientific research in these fields. Sometimes I have the impression that they are condemned with the same preconceptions that were used back then for the Copernican theory," he said.

The Inquisition, which sought out heresies, condemned Galileo for backing a theory of astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus because it clashed with the Bible which said: "God fixed the Earth upon its foundation, not to be moved forever."

Pagano said it was necessary for today's Church leaders and Vatican officials "to study more, to be more prudent, evaluate things" when dealing with scientific advances.

He said that while scientists should not presume they can teach the Church about faith, the Church should not be afraid to approach scientific issues with "much humility and circumspection."

The Catholic Church, other religious groups and anti-abortion advocates oppose embryonic stem cell research -- which scientists hope can lead to cures for diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's -- because it involves the destruction of embryos.

But the Church supports adult stem cell research, which has made advances in recent years.

The relationship between religion and science has been tense and tricky for centuries.

For example, Christian Churches were long hostile to the evolutionist theories of Charles Darwin because they conflicted with the literal biblical account of God creating the world in six days.

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