

Vatican backs down and gives mild rebuke to American nuns

Controversial inquiry that affected almost 400 institutes of US 'women religious' ends with benign report.



A three-year Vatican investigation into America's 50,000 nuns, which inspired comparisons with the Inquisition, produced an unexpectedly benign report on Tuesday, with a mild rebuke and calls for a careful review of their spiritual practices.

The Vatican ordered the "apostolic visitation" in 2008 amid growing concern in the Catholic church over what was seen as excessive feminism and secularism among US nuns. The inquiry affected almost 400 institutes of US "women religious," as nuns are formally known.

The investigation has been controversial. Not all institutes agreed to receive the Vatican's inspectors, or "visitors," some nuns refused to complete the investigators' questionnaires, and many reported being humiliated by the patriarchal tone.

Many objected strongly to an official Vatican reprimand of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), a leading group of US nuns, which censored them in harsh terms in 2012 for spending too much time helping the poor while being "silent on the right to life" and Vatican teaching on marriage and sexuality.

But in its most critical passage, Tuesday's report merely called for the American nuns to "carefully

review their spiritual practices and ministry to assure that these are in harmony with Catholic teaching about God, creation, the incarnation and the redemption,” and called for greater dialogue.

This did not entirely lift the cloud cast by the 2012 reprimand from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican’s watchdog for theological orthodoxy, which put the organisation under a mandate involving close supervision, which continues to this day. But the change in tone in Tuesday’s report may reflect a new and more conciliatory policy under Pope Francis.

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It was made clear during a press conference at the Vatican that individual reports had been drawn up. Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, the head of the Vatican department responsible for religious orders, said his officials would be sending them to “those institutes whose individual reports indicated areas of concern”.

Sister Simone Campbell, the executive director of the Catholic social justice pressure group Network and leader of the Nuns on the Bus project, which tours the US to draw attention to social issues, said the report “reflects the difference that a different pope can make”.

She said: “It was really wonderful to have the document say that religious women, more than most, may understand Pope Francis’s call to care for the poor and marginalised. The invitation to dialogue – I really hope they mean it.”

The relief among the senior American nuns who had come to Rome for the presentation of the report was almost tangible. Mother Mary Clare Millea, the superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who headed the investigation, broke down briefly when she reached the passage of her prepared statement in which she thanked the cardinal and his deputy “for responding to us with sensitivity, respect and clarity”.

She finished her report in January 2012 and had been waiting for the Vatican’s reaction ever since.

Sister Sharon Holland, the outgoing president of the LCWR, which was targeted in 2012, said the remit of the investigation had been “troubling”. But, she said, “Today we are looking at an affirmative and realistic report which, we know, is based on the study of written responses and on countless hours of attentive listening.”

Sister Marcia Allen, the LCWR’s president-elect, said the results were “very positive,” and the 2012 attitude seemed completely absent in the new report. “I think this report will create new avenues for women religious – and women in general – to begin to move to a position in the church where they can be a part of real decision-making.”

However, Ellen Euclide, director of programmes at Call to Action, a group lobbying for change in the Catholic church, said the disappointment of the 2012 criticism had not yet gone away. “People still know ... it was a demeaning way to treat women who have devoted their lives to ministry,” she said. “I don’t think that’s changed.”

“But I do think people saw some hope in the way the report came out,” she added. “We do feel a new energy in the Vatican, and hopefully it breaks down some of the patriarchy that led to the [2012] mandate.”

She wants a formal apology for the 2012 censor and mandate, but Campbell said she thought such an event was unlikely. “Rome will never say they’re wrong. I think they’re just going to let it run out. They won’t say ‘oops.’ But life is changing around it.”

John Hooper - The Guardian