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Vatikan lässt US-amerikanische Nonnen unter die Lupe nehmen

Dass klösterliche Gemeinschaften regelmäßige Besuche aus Rom erhalten, die Apostolischen Visitationen, gehört zur Routine. In diesem Fall aber scheint mehr dahinter zu stecken, meldet zumindest die gestrige Ausgabe der "New York Times" und zitiert die Ordensschwester und Professorin für Neues Testament, Sandra M. Schneiders. Mehr als 340 US-amerikanische Frauenkonvente sollen bis 2011 unter die Lupe genommen werden. Am Ende soll ein Bericht darüber informieren, ob und wie die Nonnen die katholischen Lehren umsetzen. Denn der Vatikan schaut seit langem mit Argusaugen auf die Frauen, die ihr Ordensgewand abgelegt haben, sich nicht mehr an die täglichen Gebetszeiten halten oder sich für ein Frauenpriestertum oder verheiratete Priester engagieren. Die Visitation angeordnet hat Kardinal Franc Rodé, der bereits im vergangenen Jahr etliche Nonnen kritisiert hatte, die sich mit ihrem Verhalten "außerhalb der Kirche" stellten.

U.S. Nuns Facing Vatican Scrutiny
New Yorktimes, July 1, 2009

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. Sister Sandra M. Schneiders has urged fellow nuns not to participate in the study that is being conducted by the Vatican.

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."
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