

"The Investigation of U.S. Religious Women"
 Week of February 14, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The "investigation" (the Vatican has called it a "visitation") of U.S. Religious women was formally announced on November 22, 2008, in a decree from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, then headed by a 74-year-old Slovenian Cardinal, Franc Rodé.

Tom Fox, editor of the *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR), passes on the "heaviest suspicion" that U.S. cardinals residing in Rome were behind the launching of the investigation (see his NCR column of January 14, 2011).

American cardinals who reside in Rome include William Wakefield Baum, now 84 and long retired as head of the Major Penitentiary; John P. Foley, 75 years old and Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre; Bernard F. Law, age 79, who was forced to resign as Archbishop of Boston and is now archpriest of Santa Maria Maggiore; William J. Levada, 74, who succeeded Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF); James Francis Stafford, 78, retired as head of the Major Penitentiary in 2009; and Edmund C. Szoka, 83, president emeritus of the Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State.

If the suspicion lies anywhere, the likeliest suspects are Cardinals Law, Levada, and possibly Stafford.

But that is neither here nor there. Who influenced the decision is only a matter of speculation. What is important is that the investigation of U.S. Religious women was launched and it has wasted the valuable time and energy of American sisters that could have been invested much more profitably in their many works of ministry.

I did not expect the investigation to go anywhere, but it was easy for me to think that as a male and a non-Religious (see my column of July 6, 2009 in which I predicted that the investigation would come up "more or less empty-handed as did the Vatican's earlier study of U.S. seminaries and theologates").

On February 20th of the same year, just three months after the original decree authorizing the "visitation," the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith launched an investigation of its own—a "doctrinal assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which is an association of the leaders of congregations of women Religious in the United States, with more than 1,500 members representing about 95% of the 68,000 U.S. women Religious.

Recent developments have tended to confirm my initial prediction. Cardinal Rodé has retired and been replaced by a 63-year-old Brazilian archbishop, João Bráz de Aviz, who has been interviewed by John Allen of NCR (January 7, 2011) and described by him as a "moderate-to-conservative" (January 6). Church sources in Brazil, according to Allen, generally categorize the archbishop as a centrist.

Significantly, he is not a member of a religious order or congregation, but he is close to one of the so-called "new movements," Focolare, which is itself moderately conservative. In any case, he should be an improvement over the ultra-conservative Cardinal Rodé.

Last August the Vatican appointed an American priest, Father Joseph Tobin, a former superior in the Redemptorists, to the Congregation's number 2 post. According to Tom Fox, now-Archbishop Tobin has already opened "heartening" conversations with some U.S. women Religious leaders.

As Tom Fox wrote last month, "It's still too early to know the full content of the final act of this drama. What is clear is that all spirits involved appear tired and wishing it could come to a quick end. Short of this, some editing of the script could help, like recasting the women as authors of their own lives."

On the same day a "Viewpoint" column by a Sister of Loreto, Mary Ann Cunningham, appeared on-line in NCR. Its title discloses its content and tone: "Woman religious finds Vatican-sent Visitors warm, friendly."

Sister Cunningham wrote: "The four women who visited us" at the motherhouse in Kentucky, "were, well, sisters. I don't know what I expected, but I liked them. Warm, friendly, receptive—though two wore habits, we had so much more in common with them than surface differences would suggest."

These and other recent developments bode well for the future of the "visitation," but again it's easy for a male and non-Religious to say.

Now if only the CDF would come to its senses and terminate its "doctrinal assessment" of the LCWR. Vatican officials surely have more important things to do.

The women Religious in the United States, including the leaders of LCWR, certainly do.

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"The Phoenix Hospital Case"
 Week of February 21, 2011
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The dispute between Bishop Thomas Olmstead of the Diocese of Phoenix and St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in the see city has been brewing for some time. (This week's column relies in large part on an article by Jerry Filteau, *The National Catholic Reporter's* Washington correspondent, in *NCR's* on-line edition of January 14, 2011, "Phoenix hospital still belongs to Catholic Health Association.")

The bishop and the hospital differed in their moral evaluation of a November 2009 procedure, by which doctors removed a diseased placenta to save the woman's life and in the process brought about the death of her 11-week-old unborn child.

The doctors claimed that it was an indirect and unintended abortion, allowed by the Catholic Church, while the bishop insisted that the procedure was a direct and intended abortion, and therefore immoral.

In the eyes of the bishop the blame for the procedure fell upon Sister Mary Margaret McBride, who had been a member of the hospital's ethics committee that had approved of the decision. Bishop Olmstead excommunicated her, and on December 21, 2010, he also stripped St. Joseph's Hospital of its Catholic identity because of its violation of "authentic Catholic moral teaching."

St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center is part of Catholic Healthcare West, which includes some 40 hospitals in California, Nevada, and Arizona and is one of the largest hospital systems in the United States.

Catholic Healthcare West makes clear in its "Statement of Mission, Vision and Values" that none of its hospitals performs direct abortions, but that indirect abortions *are* performed in certain medically indicated cases. Neither do these hospitals perform physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, donor insemination, or in vitro fertilization.

The hospital ignored the bishop's excommunication and continued to employ Sister McBride. The Catholic Health Association (CHA) also has thus far ignored the bishop's declaration that St. Joseph's is no longer a Catholic hospital.

The association said that it "does not enter into" questions of "how individual Catholic facilities and systems work with their local ordinary," but it recognizes the local bishop's "complete authority regarding the interpretation of" the U.S. bishops' ethical and religious directives.

It also said that questions of the Catholic character of individual hospitals and hospital systems face possible review when the CHA holds its national assembly in June.

"Several activities in Catholic health care, most notably the change in structure of Boston-based Caritas Christi Health Care, necessitated this review," CHA said.

A six-hospital Catholic system, Caritas Christi was sold last year by the Archdiocese of Boston for \$800 million to the New York-based for-profit system, Ceberus Capital Management.

This had the effect of transforming the traditionally Catholic, nonprofit hospitals into secular, for-profit entities managed by a company noted for acquisitions devoted to improving its financial bottom line.

As New York's Archbishop Timothy Dolan, newly elected President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recently noted, the bishops will continue their working relationship with the CHA, on legislation, as the CHA itself pointed out, regarding the protection of life, immigration, climate change, and relief efforts in Haiti, to name only a few.

"There are many issues," the CHA insisted, "that we are in complete agreement on and have continued to work diligently towards both as individual dioceses and as a unified ministry."

The major issue that has divided the bishops and the CHA is the Health Care Reform legislation that was passed last year by the Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama. The bishops opposed the law because, they alleged, it provided for wider federal funding of abortions, while the CHA disagreed.

The Phoenix issue also caught the attention of a columnist in *The New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof ("Tussling Over Jesus," January 27, 2011). Although he took the same side as I do, the column tended to be a bit one-sided.

Sister McBride "seems to me to have emulated the life of Jesus," Kristof wrote, while Bishop Olmstead failed to do so, having "spent much of his adult life as a Vatican bureaucrat climbing the career ladder."

I have never met Bishop Olmstead (nor Sister McBride, for that matter). I might like him. But in this matter, he was wrong.

He has nowhere to go now but to back off the moral precipice he has put himself on.

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