

Vatican defends its investigation of U.S. nuns and religious orders: An "effort to promote the Catholic identity"

News in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

Responding to “many news accounts” and “various inquiries” about a controversial investigation of U.S. sisters, a senior Vatican official defended the probe as an “effort to promote the Catholic identity and vibrancy of life” in their communities.

“I am encouraged by the efforts to identify the signs of hope, as well as concerns, within religious congregations in the United States,” Cardinal Franc Rodé, head of the office that oversees Catholic religious orders, said in a statement released November 2.

Rodé’s statement referred to the investigation, announced by the Vatican in January, of 341 communities of American women religious (not including communities of cloistered nuns), which have a total of approximately 59,000 members.

Catholic officials have said the investigation, called an “Apostolic Visitation,” was prompted by a steep decline in the number of women entering the Catholic sisterhood in the U.S. Between 1945 and 2000, the number of religious sisters in the U.S. dropped by 54 percent, from 122,159 to 79,876, according to Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

While some sisters have welcomed the investigation, others have protested heatedly. One complained anonymously in October in the Catholic magazine *Commonweal* that “American religious women are being bullied.”

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an umbrella group for U.S. sisters also under Vatican investigation, criticized the “lack of full disclosure” about who is funding the probe and why its final report will not be made public. That investigation

seeks to ensure leaders' fidelity to Catholic teaching on controversial questions of ecumenism, homo sexuality and an all-male priesthood.

The controversy has extended beyond the Catholic community, with *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd writing in October that the Vatican seeks to “herd [the sisters] back into their old-fashioned habits and convents and curb any speck of modernity or independence.”

Rodé's statement downplayed such tensions, expressing his hope that the investigation would serve as a “realistic and graced opportunity for personal and community introspection, as major superiors and sisters cooperate with this study.”

-Religion News Service