

Among faithful, mum isn't the word

Meeting in Fort Worth, leaders of Catholic orders say Vatican can't bully them

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FORT WORTH – The 1,000 leaders of U.S. Catholic religious orders meeting at the Fort Worth Convention Center on Saturday said that following Jesus simply didn't mean being dutiful mouthpieces for the Vatican or the American bishops. Rather, they urged one another not to allow the church to be hijacked by seemingly dictatorial pronouncements by a conservative hierarchy. Be bold, prophetic and, when necessary, even defiant, they told one another. "A lot of religious communities have concerns about speaking out because they fear the Vatican or their bishops will sanction them," said Sister Carol Beckermann, a Franciscan nun from St. Louis. "We can't let that intimidate us any longer." The leaders were from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents 73,000 U.S. nuns, and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, which represents 2,000 priests and brothers belonging to male religious orders. The organizations represent the majority of religious orders in the United States, which have seen dramatic drops in membership since the 1960s. The groups tend to be progressive theologically. Only a few sisters wore traditional veils, and almost none of the men were cloaked in clerical garb. They told one another not to be cowed into silence by the Vatican on issues such as the role of women in the church and priests who wanted the celibacy rule lifted. It was daring talk that appealed to attendees and stirred many to their feet in rousing applause. "Security in our church has come to be identified with the controlling power of the clergy to the detriment of the people in the pews," said the Rev. Michael Crosby, a priest from Milwaukee. "We are perishing numerically because we have not been public enough in our protest of patriarchy." The leaders came to Fort Worth to reflect on what they could do about violence in almost all forms. But there was virtually no mention of sexual violence or the abuse scandals within religious orders, which victims protested earlier in the week. Many of the religious leaders said the church hierarchy was fostering theological violence by imposing narrow interpretations of doctrine. As an example, they pointed to the movement by some bishops to bar people from Holy Communion because of their political beliefs. "I am speaking of the sinful, structural and systemic violence that has come to be canonized in a certain understanding of holiness," Father Crosby said. Leaders also pondered the link between religion and violence. They reflected on what it would take to create a lasting culture of peace. Sister Constance Phelps, president of the women's conference, said part of the answer rested in being good witnesses for peace by the way they lived. "In the face of escalating violence, let us be the face of escalating love," she said.