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LCWR crackdown more complicated than 'Rome vs. America'

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 3, 2012

U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in 2010 (CNS/Paul Haring)

Analysis

ROME -- At first blush, one compelling frame for the crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Woman Religious would seem to be "Rome vs. America," and in a sense, that's perfectly correct. This is, after all, an overhaul of an American body decreed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's powerful theological watchdog agency.

Yet drilling down, the picture becomes more complicated. At least part of the original momentum for the overhaul actually came from America, not Rome, and meanwhile, not everyone in Rome is quite on the same page.

Understanding that complexity not only helps explain where the action against LCWR came from, but it may

also hint at some of the variables involved in handicapping where the process could go from here.

NCR spoke to a cross section of both Vatican personnel and American church officials about the LCWR story in late April, all of whom spoke on background, both because they're not authorized to speak publicly and also to allow LCWR time to ponder its response.

First of all, observers note a clear contrast within the Vatican between the two departments most directly involved in the current fracas: the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which issued the April 18 doctrinal assessment, and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, popularly known as the Congregation for Religious, which has primary jurisdiction for supervising bodies such as LCWR.

In broad strokes, observers say the contrast isn't so much a matter of substance, as most Vatican officials who have tracked the discussion seem convinced there are real issues within LCWR regarding some matters of Catholic faith and practice. The tension, therefore, tends to be more about timing and tactics.

Under Brazilian Cardinal João Bráz de Aviz and American Archbishop Joseph Tobin, the Congregation for Religious has attempted in the last couple of years to calm anxieties generated by a wide-ranging apostolic visitation of women's religious communities in the United States, which recently reached conclusion. Leaders in religious life who have met the two prelates say they were told that the Congregation for Religious now wants dialogue, not confrontation.

Doubt about the timing of the move has circulated in other corners of the Vatican as well.

NCR has learned that during a meeting of Vatican personnel in early 2012 to discuss the LCWR assessment, a senior Vatican diplomat warned that launching a crackdown now might be a bad idea in light of domestic American politics, especially an increasingly nasty campaign season featuring rhetoric about a "war on women."

According to sources with knowledge of that meeting, officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith replied that such concerns were "exaggerated."

In terms of Vatican politics, any tension between the doctrinal congregation and another agency is typically resolved in favor of the former; historically, the doctrinal congregation has been dubbed *la Suprema*, or "the supreme" office. It clearly plays the lead role in this case, since Pope Benedict XVI gave it a mandate to pursue an overhaul of LCWR in January 2011, and the American bishop tapped to lead the process, Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle, is officially a delegate of the doctrinal congregation.

The assessment also indicates, however, that the Congregation for Religious will be involved in supervising the process, and it's also the Vatican department that would have to formally approve a revised set of statutes for LCWR.

According to the assessment, Sartain has five years in which to bring the process to conclusion. As it goes forward, one important variable could be how the relative influence of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for Religious shakes out over time.

On the American side of the equation, sources say the origins of the move lie at least as much in the United States as in Rome.

In that sense, the LCWR story parallels the broader apostolic visitation of women religious in America. As a blog sponsored by Italian Vatican writer Sandro Magister noted, that initiative was originally driven by American concerns, too, partly as conveyed to the Vatican's Congregation for Religious by American prelates

based in Rome, such as Cardinals Francis Stafford and Bernard Law.

Similarly, when the LCWR investigation was announced in early 2009, sources indicated that at least some of the impetus came from the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, then led by Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., who is now the archbishop of Baltimore. Lori had been elected to take over the committee in November 2005, succeeding then-Archbishop William Levada of San Francisco -- who, as cardinal, is today the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Originally, sources say, the concern pivoted primarily on the choice of speakers for the organization's assemblies. The American bishop tapped to conduct a review that led to the April 18 assessment, Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, is also a member of the doctrine committee.

The consensus at the time, sources said, was that any move against LCWR needed to come from the Vatican, not the U.S. bishops, since LCWR is a "juridical person" under church law, originally recognized by the Vatican in 1959.

As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has pursued the LCWR investigation, Americans have continued to play an important role. Aside from Levada, the congregation's staff during the time the assessment unfolded included American Archbishop Charles Brown, who is now the pope's ambassador to Ireland, and Msgr. Steven Lopes, Levada's priest-secretary and also an official of the doctrinal section.

In terms of where things go from here, one potential wild card is a looming regime change at the doctrinal congregation. Levada turns 76 on June 15, and most observers believe his successor will be named sometime after that date.

Speculation in Rome currently has Bishop Gerhard Müller of Regensburg, Germany, as the favorite for the position. If Levada's successor is indeed a non-American, some observers believe that could have implications for the LCWR overhaul -- not so much by changing the congregation's philosophical approach, perhaps, but its intensity level.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is **jallen@ncronline.org**.]

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