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LCWR's annual meeting: Some reflections and a little back story

Jamie Manson | Aug. 15, 2012 Grace on the Margins

In the 18th century, they crossed the Atlantic in small ships, fending off pirates along the way, to get to this country. Once they were here, they ministered to the wounded on the battlefields of the Civil War and provided aid to victims of the great San Francisco earthquake and the influenza epidemic. From humble beginnings, they managed to establish the largest private school system in the country, 110 colleges and universities, and more than 600 hospitals in the U.S.

But after last week's LCWR general assembly, women religious might be facing their greatest challenge yet: getting the Roman Catholic hierarchy to open itself up to dialogue about some of the most pressing issues facing the Roman Catholic Church today.

As anyone interested in the future of LCWR knows by now, the sisters who participated in last week's much-anticipated meeting charged its officers with the task of "beginning a conversation with Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the apostolic delegate appointed by CDF to oversee LCWR." The hope, according to LCWR's press statement, released Friday, "is that an open and honest dialogue may lead not only to increasing understanding between the church leadership and women religious, but also to creating more possibilities for the laity and, particularly for women, to have a voice in the church."

After reading the statement, some among the laity expressed disappointment that LCWR didn't simply disband and reorganize outside of the structures of the church. The fact is, such a move would be canonically impossible. As more than one sister explained to me, LCWR is what the Vatican calls a "public juridic person." According to the 1983 Code of Canon [1], a public juridic person is an "aggregate of persons" or an "aggregate of things" (c. 115) that exists to "fulfill in the name of the Church, according to the norm of the prescripts of law, the proper function entrusted to them in view of the public good" (c. 116). Therefore, only the Vatican, having created LCWR as a public juridic person, has the ability to dissolve it.

Other lay advocates for church justice have groaned at the idea that anyone still believes they can be in dialogue or negotiate with the hierarchy. Reform groups have been trying to transform the church from within its structures for decades with little success. Many have realized that the climate in the hierarchy has become so uncompromising that no reform group can say honestly that it is in dialogue with the institutional church any longer.

The truth is, up until the close of the assembly, LCWR hadn't had the opportunity to speak in any depth with Sartain. And unlike his confrere in Ohio -- Bishop Leonard Blair, whose Fresh Air interview created a stir among Catholic commentators -- Sartain so far has appeared to be media-shy. An attempt at a conversation with the man selected to oversee their overhaul seemed to be a necessary first step in the process.

Having been with the sisters at the meeting's sessions that were open to the public, I feel fairly certain that not one woman in that gathering of 900 sisters was willing to accept the mandate as-is. Because the sisters have a decision-making process that is inclusive and non-hierarchical, there were plenty of opportunities in their confidential executive sessions for women to express their reservations about LCWR's direction. But there is

diversity within the body of LCWR, and some communities are larger and more financially secure than others. Participants in the assembly took seriously the concerns of women religious whose communities, assets and retirement funds might be at risk.

Women religious are well aware of all of the church reform work that has gone before, and they realized together at the assembly that all of this laboring in the fields of justice has brought them to a new moment. The sisters' approach of seeking dialogue with the hierarchy comes from a place of deep hope, not from a place of naïveté. They recognize that ultimately they may not be successful and there may be greater risks, perilous terrain and bolder decisions ahead.

In many ways, the meeting felt like three days of sustained prayer. Every session I attended was at turns an opportunity for shared communal grief over the crisis they are facing, shared strength and courage-building for journey, and shared surrender to God's calling, wherever it might lead. "Surrender here, into the Source of all Being. Let go of fear. Fall into Love. Open your heart to what is," the community sang over and over.

Praying with them and sharing in their song, I realized just how new a moment this is for most of the women who gathered there. Although a good number of sisters have attended justice church meetings like Call to Action throughout the years, few have ever had to face the Vatican directly. Up until the doctrinal assessment, the Vatican had typically tried to pick off individual sisters for "unorthodox" actions. Sr. Jeannine Gramick, Sr. Louis Akers, Sr. Louise Lears and their respective superiors all experienced their own individual showdowns with the Vatican and the USCCB.

We justifiably equate sisters as advocates for the marginalized. But their advocacy by and large has been for those who are marginalized by society rather than those marginalized by the church. This is the first time women religious, as one body, have found themselves in direct conflict with the Vatican. As one sister told me, "We haven't really been pushed to do this until now."

Now that they have accepted the call of those marginalized within the church, they will attempt to be a voice that "creates spaces for honest and open conversation on the critical moral and ethical questions that face the global community," as their press statement reads. Although some pundits have tried to argue that the sisters, and most progressive Catholics for that matter, no longer have any leverage within the institutional church, women religious have realized they do have positional authority, and it's time to use it.

Together, they are a large stakeholder in the church. Most of them have money, property and influence. Many Catholics see them as leaders in the church, and their consecrated lives give them a powerful presence in the Catholic community and in wider society. They are attempting to use whatever privilege they have been given to bring the church to greater justice. In doing so, they will be the largest group of Catholics to corporately challenge the hierarchy to open itself up to dialogue. And, as the many nun justice vigils attest, there is strong lay support behind them.

As one sister told me, they "will try to create a way where there is no way," echoing a common refrain used in the Civil Rights movement. They will not walk away from the institution without taking this unprecedented opportunity to invite the larger church into deeper conversation. The fact is, I don't believe women religious will ever walk away from their connection to the institutional church. One thing I learned for certain last week: If the sisters go, it will be because Vatican tossed them out.

At one point during the LCWR press conference, one particularly aggressive journalist insisted that Sr. Pat Farrell, then LCWR's president, tell us what exactly LCWR wants.

"I'm hearing a lot of vague language about dialogue," he barked at her. "But what do you want to walk away with?"

She paused for a moment, then responded quietly:

> "What we want is to finally, at some end stage of the process, be recognized and understood as equals in the church, that our form of religious life can be and *is* respected and affirmed. And really, we want to get to the point where there is an environment -- not just for us, but for the entire Catholic church -- for the ability to openly and honestly search for truth together, to talk about issues that are very complicated. There is not that climate right now. So it might sound like just asking for dialogue is vague, but I think ultimately, one of our deepest goals is to create that kind of climate in the church -- not just for ourselves, but for the Catholic church throughout the world."

Given their bold history in our country, if anyone has a prayer of getting this done, it would be the sisters.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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