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Vatican's doctrinal head: LCWR must not be 'anti-Rome'

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 4, 2012 NCR Today

The high-ranking church official responsible for the Vatican's takeover of the group that represents the majority of U.S. Catholic sisters has warned that the sisters should not "take an attitude against Rome" or be "anti-Rome."

"Setting oneself up against 'Rome' has never brought authentic reform or renewal to the church," Archbishop Gerhard Müller said in an interview posted to the *National Catholic Register* website Thursday.

Müller is the head of the Vatican's powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which last April sharply criticized the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the organization that represents about 80 percent of U.S. Catholic sisters.

Müller's comments Thursday come days after LCWR's president, Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, addressed the situation between the Vatican and her group in its monthly online newsletter, saying the "groundswell of laity that has risen to support LCWR" has been "overwhelming."

In his interview, Müller, who took the post at the doctrinal congregation July 2, is asked about the situation between LCWR and the CDF by *National Catholic Register* correspondent Edward Pentin.

While Müller states "there is no struggle between the Holy See and [LCWR]," he also says the Vatican wants to help LCWR "in its renewal of religious life" by focusing on the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

"Renewal will only be possible if there is a renewed commitment to the three vows and a new identification with our Catholic faith and life," Müller said.

In a document known as a "doctrinal assessment," first released April 18 [1], the Vatican congregation said there were a "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" in LCWR's programs and ordered the group to revise and place itself under the authority of three U.S. bishops. Among other things, the congregation said there was "corporate dissent" in LCWR regarding the church's sexual teachings.

In a response in June, LCWR replied [2] that the congregation's criticisms were based on unsubstantiated accusations, came from a flawed process and had caused "scandal and pain throughout the church."

On Thursday, Müller made an oblique reference to the congregation's allegations, saying, "We cannot fulfill our mission if we are split, everyone speaking against one another, working against one another, or accepting ideas from outside that don't belong to our faith."

"And we cannot accept doctrines about sexuality that don't respect the fundamental essentials of revealed anthropology," he continued.

The April order from the congregation garnered wide coverage of the issue in the media and spawned a wide show of support for the sisters, with rallies being held in cities throughout the U.S.

Following a meeting of about 900 of their leaders in August, LCWR leaders announced [3] that while they would continue discussions with church officials regarding the takeover, they would "reconsider" if "forced to compromise the integrity" of their mission.

In his interview, Müller said "we must find new ways to serve the society of today, not waste our time with 'civil wars' inside the Catholic Church. We must work together and have confidence."

"But it is important to remember that at no time in the history of the Church has a group or a movement in one country ever been successful when it has taken an attitude against Rome, when it has been "anti-Rome," Müller goes on [4].

"Setting oneself up against 'Rome' has never brought authentic reform or renewal to the Church. Only through a renewed commitment to the full teaching of Christ and his Church, and through a renewed spirit of collaboration with the Holy Father and the bishops in communion with him, will there be renewal and new life in the Catholic Church and a new evangelization of our society."

In her article in the LCWR newsletter, the LCWR Update [5], Deacon asks: "Might this be a time for all of us to reach out to our neighbors and provide a place for people to come together to pray, share their stories of faith, and fortify one another to be a stronger church? The ground rules we have set ourselves seem to match the desires of many people seeking open, honest, respectful dialogue. What better way to celebrate the Year of Faith and the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council?"

As part of the Vatican's mandate, LCWR has been ordered to place itself under the authority of three U.S. bishops, with Seattle's Archbishop J. Peter Sartain serving as the group's "archbishop delegate."

Following the meeting of their leaders in August, LCWR leaders met with Sartain for the first time Aug. 11. After that meeting, the leaders released a statement [6] saying Sartain had "listened carefully" to their concerns about the mandate.

"The archbishop asked for assistance from LCWR to learn more about the conference and about the members' experience and understandings of religious life," that statement continued. "LCWR will provide Archbishop Sartain with resources they believe will be helpful, and its officers plan to meet with him again later in the fall."

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