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Women religious leadership conference has been faithful to its mission

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

In a letter written on Feb. 20, the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal William Levada, informed the officers of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious that the Congregation would be conducting a "doctrinal assessment" of the organization.

The Leadership Conference is an association of the leaders of congregations of Catholic women religious in the United States, with more than 1,500 members representing about 95 percent of the 68,000 U.S. women religious.

In a statement released soon thereafter, the officers acknowledged receipt of the letter and pointed out that the conference "faces this process with confidence, believing that the conference has remained faithful to its mission of service to leaders of congregations of women religious as they seek to further the mission of Christ in today's world."

The Vatican assessment became necessary, according to Cardinal Levada, because the three issues that were surfaced at a 2001 meeting in Rome between the officers of the conference and the Congregation remain in his mind unresolved.

Those three areas of doctrinal concern are the 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* on the ordination of women to the priesthood, the Congregation's 2000 declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the unique role of Christ in salvation, and "the problem of homosexuality."

Levada informed the officers of the conference that "Given the tenor and the doctrinal content of various addresses given at the annual assemblies of the conference in the intervening years, this dicastery can only

conclude that the problems which had motivated its request in 2001 continue to be present."

Levada also acknowledged that his decision to conduct this "doctrinal assessment" was reached in concert with Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, which had announced last December that it was initiating a "visitation" of communities of women religious in the United States, to examine the "quality of life" among their members and to determine why their numbers have declined in recent decades.

Not having at hand copies of the talks given at conference assemblies since 2001, I am not in a position to evaluate Levada's expressed concern about these addresses nor how the three issues (women's ordination, salvation, and homosexuality) were treated in these presentations.

However, I do know enough about the nature and history of the Leadership Conference to express amazement that there could be any "doctrinal" concerns about the organization and its leadership.

Some of the finest women religious in the United States, and worldwide, have headed the Leadership Conference. By identifying only a sample, I do not mean to imply that those sisters who remain unmentioned are (or were) of lesser quality and achievement.

The list of past national chairpersons and presidents of the Leadership Conference reads like a Hall of Fame of religious life: Mary Luke Tobin, Thomas Aquinas (Elizabeth) Carroll, Margaret Brennan, Francis Borgia Rothleubber, Joan Chittister, Mary Dooley, Theresa Kane, Nadine Foley, Doris Gottemoeller, Camille D'Arienzo, and so many others.

Moreover, the Leadership Conference's mission statement is as straightforward in its pastoral and doctrinal purposes as it could possibly be: "to promote a developing understanding and living of religious life by: assisting its members personally and communally to carry out more collaboratively their service of leadership in order to accomplish further the mission of Christ in today's world; fostering dialogue and collaboration among religious congregations within the church and in the larger society; [and] developing models for initiating and strengthening relationships with groups concerned with the needs of society, thereby maximizing the potential of the conference for effecting change."

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But there are certain key words and phrases, like "developing," "dialogue," "collaboration," "change," and "today's world," that are red flags for some church officials and a minority of women religious who are locked into the religious culture of the 1940s and 1950s, when nuns wore elaborate habits, remained for the most part confined to their convents and religious houses, took the names assigned to them, often those of male saints, and limited their apostolic activity principally to teaching children, and ministering to the sick, orphans, and unmarried pregnant girls.

It was unthinkable in those pre-conciliar years for a nun to appear in secular clothes, however simple, to engage in apostolic activities outside the convent or religious house, to reclaim their baptismal names, and to become engaged in ministries of social justice, human rights, and peace.

It was even more unthinkable that these now highly educated women would begin to think for themselves and to speak and act accordingly.

That is what seems to bother their critics the most.

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