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Dallas bishop welcomes LCWR - with media absent

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NCR Today



Dallas Bishop Kevin Farrell warmly welcomed the Leadership

Conference of Women Religious on the first evening of its annual gathering, in Dallas, Texas Aug. 10, several women religious reported.

He spoke before some 750 women religious. However, his welcoming address was officially closed to the media. No written remarks were available, according to LCWR Communications Director Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Annmarie Sanders.

"We were pleased," she told *NCR*, "with the bishop's warm welcoming words and the positive things he had to say about women religious."

Earlier in the day Sister Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity who is president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, addressed the LCWR, but the media was kept from entering the room in which she spoke.

The Catholic Health Association (CHA) and LCWR have been under attack by the U.S. bishops since both organizations supported a health care bill that the bishops opposed. The two organizations argued the

bill brought health care to an additional 33 million people. The bishops said that measures in the bill allowed public funding for abortion, an assessment the CHA and LCWR did not share.

LCWR has operated under a Vatican cloud for the past 18 months since it was told by Vatican officials LCWR was facing a doctrinal inquiry. Since that time LCWR has worked, as best it can, outside the public spotlight, a strategy reflected here at its annual gathering.

Vatican officials told LCWR it was being checked out for allegedly failing to uphold church teachings on homosexuality, the primacy of the Catholic church, and women's ordination. When LCWR leaders met in Rome last April with members of two Vatican congregations, officials in those congregations also told the women they were displeased that they broke ranks with the U.S. bishops over the health care bill.

Several months before the announcement of the LCWR doctrinal inquiry, the organization was told by the Vatican that it had opened a three-year Apostolic Visitation of U.S. women religious communities to determine their "quality of life."

The first two stages of the investigations involved interviews of the heads of women religious communities and questionnaires they were told to fill out concerning their communities. The women are now in the third phase of the investigations. This phase involves visits by teams of Vatican appointed investigators to chosen religious communities.

More than two dozen visitations took place last spring and more are set for the fall. The heads of women religious communities have been tight lipped about these visits, although some have said privately they have been generally cordial.

Congregations heads have been told by LCWR not to speak to the media about the visits, several have said. Officially, LCWR has provided no information about the visits.

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Several women religious superiors, speaking to *NCR* here in Dallas, say they find themselves in a difficult position. Under scrutiny by Rome, they say they want to work in private, away from the glare of the media - and possible Vatican criticism.

One women religious community head told *NCR* Aug. 10: "I hope you understand. This is a family matter. You don't want family matters discussed in the public. Some time in the future we can talk about it." She added said she had no idea when that time would come.

In recent years it has been the practice of LCWR to limit media access to their annual conference events. This year, however, some women say, restrictions have increased.

As an example, *NCR* was denied access to the conference exhibition hall until a clearance was given by the LCWR communications director.

Officially, the media are only being allowed into three conference talks, two conference keynote addresses and the final address by outgoing LCWR president Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Marlene Weisenbeck.

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