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LCWR annual assembly to go forward

by Joshua J. McElwee



Artwork taken from the LCWR's 2012 Assembly website.

When the Vatican put the largest organization representing U.S. women religious into church receivership, saying it needed to submit to the control of an archbishop and reform its statutes, a major criticism cited was the group's annual assemblies, which were said to have presented viewpoints that were "a serious source of scandal."

Despite that concern, this year's assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, planned for August, is to go forward with Vatican acknowledgement, *NCR* has learned.

LCWR leadership and Cardinal William Levada, the head of the Vatican congregation that ordered the group's reform, have "mutually agreed" the assembly will continue as planned, Sr. Annmarie Sanders, LCWR's associate director for communications, said in a brief phone interview Tuesday.

That agreement, Sanders said, came at the April 18 meeting in Rome at which the sisters were first told of the move by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Given the congregation's harsh criticism of LCWR assemblies and speakers, for many observers, the continuation of this year's assembly at first seemed like an open question. And for those looking to find fault with the assemblies' content, this year's lineup of speakers could still raise eyebrows.

The keynote address at the Aug. 7-10 conference in St. Louis is to be given by Barbara Marx Hubbard, an author known for her advancement of a worldview called "conscious evolution."

According to the assembly's registration materials, Hubbard's presentation is to explore how women's congregations can discern the future of religious life in a way "that remains open to the new levels of consciousness, even as that revelation exceeds the boundaries of present day understanding of one's faith, as well as the charism and mission of one's institute."

Also on the agenda of the LCWR assembly are *NCR* publisher Tom Fox and *NCR* columnist Jamie Manson, who will share a panel discussion with Jennifer Gordon, a member of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kan., to discuss "Religious Life in the Future: What Might it Look Like?"

Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders, who has taught at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley since 1976, is expected to receive an award for outstanding leadership at the conference.

Schneiders' latest book, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church*, is a collection of essays Schneiders wrote reflecting on the experiences of women religious during a separate Vatican investigation of individual congregations of U.S. women's orders. Called an "apostolic visitation," a report on that investigation, which was ordered by the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, was submitted to Rome in January.

Schneiders told *NCR* on Wednesday that she had received earlier this week materials informing her that the LCWR assembly would go forward and that "there had been no change in plans" in the content following news of the Vatican's move.

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Announcement of the Vatican order first came in a press release April 18 from the U.S. bishops' conference. The release was accompanied by an eight-page document of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and a one-page statement from Levada.

The U.S. bishops' release said Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain had been appointed to oversee LCWR during its revision. According to the Vatican document, Sartain is to be given authority over the group in five separate areas, including reviewing "LCWR plans and programs, including General Assemblies and publications."

While members of LCWR's leadership were in Rome for meetings the same time Sartain is in the city for his *ad limina* visit to meet with Pope Benedict, Sanders told *NCR* she did not know whether Sartain and the LCWR leaders had met.

Sanders, a member of the Congregation of the Sister, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Scranton, Penn., serves on *NCR*'s board of directors

Last year's LCWR assembly found the group openly addressing what some have viewed as a vocations crisis among women religious.

To consider those concerns, the 2011 assembly saw the group not focusing on routine matters of administration or finance but rather spending long periods of their time together in silence to contemplate where U.S. religious life may be moving.

Last year's assembly also saw release of a report on the decline in numbers of women religious in the U.S. with membership in the LCWR, which seemed to indicate the decrease has been fairly rapid in the last few years, with numbers dropping from 60,642 sisters in 2007 to 46,451 in 2011.

At that time, LCWR projected there to be a loss of another 2,787 sisters from the group in 2012.

Titled "Mystery Unfolding: Leading in the Evolutionary Now," this year's assembly seems focused on expanding last year's conversation about the future of U.S. religious life.

In the registration materials for the event, LCWR states that there is a "transformation of consciousness" before women religious today that is "dramatic and compelling and demands a reorientation of thinking and believing."

Last year's LCWR assembly came about partly as an outpouring of the work of the group's Contemporary Religious Life Project, which was tasked in 2010 with spearheading a five-year contemplation process to discern what the future could look like for U.S. women religious.

Schneiders, a noted theologian known for her writings on women religious, said she thought LCWR's focus on discerning its future is a response to the fact that "these are difficult times for the church and the world."

"We have fewer numbers, we have less resources, we have more problems, there are more people suffering, so this is really the time to make best possible use of person power and intelligence and theological smarts," she said.

A December 2011 CARA study on those choosing to enter religious life said the average age of women professing perpetual vows in religious orders that year was 39.

That study, called "New Sisters and Brothers in Perpetual Vows," gathered responses from both superiors of orders affiliated with the LCWR and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, a separate canonically recognized organization thought to represent up to 20 percent of U.S. women religious.

During the discernment sessions at last year's assembly, LCWR's members were asked to spend time reflecting silently on a specific topic regarding the future of religious life, then were given time to share whatever insights they might have.

Sr. Pat Farrell, a vice president of the Sisters of St. Francis of Dubuque, Iowa, and LCWR's president, said in an interview before last year's assembly that it was time for women religious to re-examine their calling.

"We are fewer," Farrell told *NCR* in August 2011. "It's time to loosen our perceptions of who we are and listen attentively to what God is calling us to do now."

Also expected at this year's LCWR assembly is an annual transition of the group's top leaders -- their president-elect, president and past-president -- who govern the LCWR collaboratively with the group's secretary, treasurer and executive director.

In LCWR's model, a president-elect is elected by the group's membership at each year's assembly. Following a year in the position, she automatically succeeds to the presidency, and then to the position of past-president the following year.

It is unknown whether the process will change following Sartain's appointment.

According to precedents set by previous years' assemblies, Farrell would be expected to move to the position of past-president at this year's gathering, while Dominican Sr. Mary Hughes, prioress of the Sisters of St. Dominic of Amityville, New York, would be expected to move out of leadership with the group.

The April 18 Vatican document -- which also gave Sartain authority over the LCWR's statutes, creation of new programs, application of liturgical texts and affiliations with other groups -- specifically cited an address by Dominican Sr. Laurie Brink at the 2007 LCWR assembly, saying certain passages in it addressing how some members of religious congregations view their vocations indicated a "serious source of scandal" that was "incompatible with religious life."

Regarding LCWR's emphasis on discerning the future of religious life, Schneiders, who is also a recipient of the John Courtney Murray Award, the highest honor bestowed by the Catholic Theological Society of America, said the group is also re-emphasizing its relationship with God.

"When you don't have the resources you once had, you realize that where our strength really comes from is not material things," Schneiders said. "It comes from our own union with God. And that's what's important to people."

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