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Notes on the LCWR overhaul

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 27, 2012 All Things Catholic

By far, the biggest Vatican story at the moment in the American media market is an announced overhaul of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the main umbrella group for superiors of the roughly 400 women's orders in the States. The move has been presented by the Vatican as a "reform" but styled as a "crackdown" in most press coverage.

As is by now well known, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's powerful doctrinal watchdog agency, has faulted LCWR for silence on issues such as abortion and euthanasia, a climate of "corporate dissent" on matters such as homosexuality and women's ordination, and the inroads of "radical feminism." The congregation appointed Archbishop James Peter Sartain of Seattle as its delegate to oversee reform, with power to do things like reviewing documents before publication and signing off on speakers for LCWR meetings.

The story has become a cause célèbre, primarily because of the deep fault lines it seems to encapsulate: men vs. women, family values vs. women's issues (especially in a domestic political season in which an alleged "war on women" is in the air), Rome vs. America, left vs. right, authority vs. dissent, the hierarchy vs. the grassroots, and so on. Depending on where one stands vis-à-vis those divides, it's easy to see LCWR as either a hero or a scapegoat.

Officers of LCWR met with Sartain for the first time Wednesday. They were in Rome for a regular annual round of meetings, scheduled before the current row broke out, while Sartain is in town for the *ad limina* visit of the bishops from his region. The meeting was mostly a "getting to know you" session in which Sartain reportedly signaled a willingness to be patient while LCWR considers its response, along with a basic desire to stay in conversation.

According to the Vatican decree, Sartain has five years to do the job. In itself that's unusual, as the Vatican generally does not provide a "sunset date" for such undertakings. (For instance, Pope Benedict XVI this week empanelled three cardinals to investigate the recent Vatican leaks scandal without giving them a fixed term.) The expiration date thus seems a signal that this process is expected to have an end as well as a beginning.

What that end might be, however, remains to be seen, in part because it's not yet clear if LCWR will be willing to live with the limits on its autonomy that a face-value reading of the Vatican document implies. On background, LCWR leaders have said they want to take some time to consult their members and to ponder their next move.

I'm in Rome at the moment, where, among other things, I'm working on a follow-up story about the overhaul for a future edition of *NCR*. In the meantime, the following are four observations about the story to date.

Contrasts in the Vatican

Insiders have long realized there's no such animal as "the Vatican" in the sense of an organism that thinks only

one thought at a time. The Vatican is instead a complex bureaucracy encompassing a variety of outlooks and instincts, which means it rarely speaks with just one voice on anything.

The LCWR business is a classic case in point.

The doctrinal assessment of the LCWR and its demands for reforms in LCWR's statutes, plans and programs was issued April 18 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, led by American Cardinal William Levada. The other Vatican department that's part of the picture is the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, popularly known as the "Congregation for Religious." Under church law, primary responsibility for overseeing religious life, including organizations such as LCWR, belongs to the Congregation for Religious.

The assessment indicates that implementation of the LCWR reform will be jointly overseen by the Congregation for the Faith and the Congregation for Religious, though Sartain is officially a delegate of the Congregation for the Faith. It also stipulates that revised statutes for LCWR would be approved by the Congregation for Religious, though as with any other major Vatican decision, it would probably also come to the Congregation for the Faith for a doctrinal review.

It's an open secret that the tones emanating from these two departments about women religious in America are rather distinct.

Under Brazilian Cardinal João Bráz de Aviz and American Archbishop Joseph Tobin, the Congregation for Religious in the last couple of years has attempted to calm anxieties generated by a wide-ranging apostolic visitation of women's religious communities in the United States, which recently reached conclusion. (That's a separate process from the doctrinal review of LCWR; more on that in a moment.) Bráz and Tobin have signaled that they want dialogue, not confrontation, and have made clear there won't be any immediate earthquake as a result of the visitation.

When the LCWR initially said it was "stunned" by the assessment from the Congregation for the Faith, there was swift blowback. Critics said the tensions outlined in the document have been brewing for decades, so what's the surprise? Vatican insiders also insisted that Levada had written to LCWR in late February to inform them that results of the assessment would be discussed in an April meeting.

Yet the shock was nonetheless understandable, given the more conciliatory signals LCWR and other leaders in women's religious life had been receiving from the Congregation for Religious.

In broad strokes, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith believes that fundamental deviations from Catholic faith and practice have been allowed to fester inside some circles of women's religious life for too long, which they see as especially serious in the case of LCWR, given that it's a juridical person under canon law, approved by the Vatican, with a special responsibility to faithfully represent the church. The climate in the Congregation for Religious, meanwhile, tends to the view that now is a time for confidence-building exercises rather than what will inevitably be perceived as punitive measures. In addition, some senior Vatican officials, and not just in the Congregation for Religious, worry that the LCWR overhaul feeds images of a clerical boys' club hostile to women.

To be clear, the contrast, at least inside Vatican walls, isn't so much over whether the doctrinal assessment points to some real concerns. It's instead over whether the overhaul announced April 18 is the right way to address those concerns and whether this is the right time to do it.

Those inclined to a Machiavellian view might suspect the Vatican has a "good cop, bad cop" routine in play, with the Congregation for the Faith wielding the hammer and the Congregation for Religious dangling the

carrot. In reality, the situation is not nearly that orchestrated, and the different tones simply reflect real contrasts in outlook.

Framing this issue as "the Vatican vs. the nuns," therefore, is sexy but ultimately misleading. As always, the question is which Vatican officials, not to mention which nuns, we're talking about.

Regime change at the CDF

In terms of where things go from here, one important variable may be the looming regime change at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Levada will turn 76 on June 15, and it's widely expected that a replacement will be named sometime after that milestone. (Some observers believe Benedict XVI will keep Levada in place a bit longer in order to finish up the current back-and-forth with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X about possible reunion, but it should be clear fairly soon whether that's a realistic short-term prospect.)

At the moment, the smart money still seems to be on Bishop Gerhard Müller of Regensburg, Germany, as Levada's most likely successor.

When those rumors first made the rounds, there was an effort in traditionalist circles to sabotage Müller's candidacy by circulating anonymous emails containing allegedly heterodox statements on the virginity of Mary, the Eucharist and ecumenism, while others tried to make an issue out of Müller's longstanding friendship with Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. (Every year since 1998, Müller has travelled to Peru to take a course from Gutierrez. He has also spent time living with farmers in a rural parish near the border with Bolivia.)

Most observers believe that the push to torpedo Müller fell short largely because Müller is the bishop of Benedict's home diocese and the editor of the pope's collected theological works, so it's not as if Benedict doesn't know what he would be getting.

If not Müller, another rumor making the rounds is that Levada's successor could be Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, who currently serves as prefect of the Congregation for Bishops. While Ouellet has only been in that job since June 2010, he's considered a serious intellectual in sync with Benedict's own theological outlook. There was a brief period in which Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., was also thought to be under consideration, though most observers now seem to believe that possibility is a long shot.

For purposes of the LCWR overhaul, the point is that in fairly short order, the Congregation for the Faith could be led by a non-American who might not feel the same personal investment in the process.

To be sure, other personnel involved in the assessment won't necessarily be moving on and the Congregation for the Faith has a deep institutional memory, so Levada's departure probably won't signal a sea change in approach. It could, however, betoken a difference in intensity, and by itself, that might be significant.

Keeping the record straight

Two brief observations are in order regarding coverage of the story to date.

First, there's been an understandable tendency to confuse the action regarding LCWR with the broader apostolic visitation of women religious in America, which was sponsored by the Congregation for Religious and is now closed. In part, that's because both processes were announced at roughly the same moment and have unfolded over the same span of time.

An April 20 blog on "The Daily Beast" [1] by Barbie Latza Nadeau, for instance, suggested that Sr. Clare Millea, the American sister tapped by the Congregation for Religious to run the apostolic visitation, is somehow

also responsible for the assessment of the LCWR. (That piece, by the way, ran under the provocative headline "Nuns Gone Wild!" and featured a picture of Millea.)

For the record, the doctrinal review of LCWR and the visitation of women religious are two separate things, and it's inaccurate to suggest that the LCWR overhaul is a direct consequence of the visitation.

As an aside, it might be worth keeping the visitation in mind in thinking about how things with LCWR might shake out. When the visitation was announced in early 2009, it produced a round of dismay and resentment in some quarters similar to what's playing out today with regard to the LCWR. Yet now that the visitation is over, many observers would say it wasn't as traumatic as some early forecasts suggested.

At face value, the Congregation for the Faith seems to have flung down a fairly dramatic gauntlet to LCWR. Experience suggests, however, that sometimes things that seem cataclysmic at the beginning have a way of becoming less so as time rolls on.

Second, it's been suggested that the move against LCWR amounts to payback for the more favorable position many sisters in the States took on the Obama administration's health care reform initiative, in contrast to the American bishops.

No doubt the recent flaps haven't helped, but on background Vatican officials insist that the issues with LCWR involve longstanding concerns and are not driven by current events.
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Here's the chronology.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith informed LCWR that it was launching a doctrinal probe back in April 2008, before the health care reform debate in the States heated up. Led by Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, the review unfolded in 2009 and 2010. Its conclusions were actually reached in January 2011, but the congregation decided to wait until the apostolic visitation was over before presenting them.

Given that timeline, the split over health care reform could perhaps more accurately be seen as illustrating the tensions that led to the doctrinal assessment rather than directly causing it.

A minor miracle

Whatever else comes from the tumult, it's already prompted one minor miracle that most Catholic observers probably thought they'd never live to see: Sr. Joan Chittister and George Weigel actually agreeing on something.

Chittister, of course, is a Benedictine and probably America's most prominent feminist sister. Weigel, a biographer of John Paul II, is a champion of orthodoxy. Politically speaking, they're usually matter and antimatter, yet on the question of how LCWR ought to respond to its present travails, they're on the same page.

Chittister made her comments in *NCR*'s day-one story [2] on the Vatican announcement. In effect, she said LCWR ought to disband canonically and then regroup outside the official structures of the church. Doing so, she said, might be the only way to avoid "giving your charism away" and "demeaning the ability of women to make distinctions."

In an April 23 essay for *National Review* [3], Weigel wrote that Chittister's suggestion "had the virtue of honesty" and "drew the curtain on a long-running charade" -- by which he meant that in his opinion, LCWR is outside "the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy and orthopraxis," so dissolving its official status would be recognizing reality.

To some, the fact that prominent voices on both the Catholic left and right seem to be reaching the same conclusion is a clear signal of where things stand: For better or worse, the future of LCWR might not be within officialdom.

That, however, is not quite the tone Sartain has struck in his brief early comments. Speaking to the Catholic News Service in Rome [4] earlier this week, he said he hopes to help LCWR see "that we are all in this together" and called the overhaul "a great opportunity [to] strengthen and improve all of our relationships on every level."

(I contacted Sartain to give him the chance to expand, but he said that out of respect for the members of the LCWR board, who are scheduled to meet in May, he doesn't want to say anything more for a while.)

Beyond "Vatican vs. nuns" and "Rome vs. America," the fallout from the LCWR fracas thus illustrates another persistent tension in Catholic life, between what one might call the "prophetic" and "communal" instincts. The former wants to push the church to realize the best version of itself (as a given prophet might understand it), while the latter regards having a place at the table as at least as important as getting one's own way. Prophets want hard choices to be made while community folks are more willing to tolerate compromise as the best way of holding the family together.

The question now is whether, vis-à-vis the LCWR, those instincts are necessarily in conflict or whether there's a "both/and" solution waiting to be crafted.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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