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Sartain is the right man for the LCWR job, former co-workers say

by Dan Morris-Young



Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle is pictured after an interview with Catholic News Service in Rome April 22. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Women religious and others who have worked with the "archbishop delegate" charged with overseeing potential new compass points and sail settings for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious describe him as a man of prayer who listens well, welcomes dialogue, defends church teaching, administrates fairly, shares authority and remembers people's names.

Most persons contacted about their views of Archbishop J. Peter Sartain as an episcopal leader declined any comment because of avoid-the-media directives from their diocese or their religious community issued in the wake of an April 18 statement from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Others point out that Sartain's credibility will continue to be dogged by his role in the ordination of a man for the Joliet, Ill., diocese who seven months later was arrested for child molestation and is now serving four years in prison for criminal sexual assault of a minor.

Met with thunderous reaction in the United States, the doctrinal congregation's document charged that "the current doctrinal and pastoral situation of LCWR is grave and a matter of serious concern" and criticized the organization -- whose member congregations represent four of five U.S. women religious -- for being mute on issues such as abortion and euthanasia and displaying "corporate dissent" on topics including homosexuality and the ordination of women.

Issued with the explicit approval of Pope Benedict XVI, the doctrinal congregation document invested Sartain with authority over LCWR statutes, programs, publications, assemblies, liturgical activities and affiliations with other entities. It also mandated a link between his work and the U.S. bishops' conference.

Charity Sr. Mary Barbara Philippart said she views the tension between the congregation and LCWR as "trying to find a balance between freedom of conscience and the teaching authority of the church," adding that Sartain "is one of the best to be able to do it."

"It is always a struggle to obtain the balance between those two things -- purity of doctrine and freedom of thought -- and it is not new in church history," said Philippart, who worked in Hispanic radio ministry for four years during Sartain's episcopate in the Little Rock, Ark., diocese (2000-2006).

Now semiretired and living at her motherhouse near Cincinnati, Philippart still flies to Little Rock for a week each month to work with the Hispanic permanent diaconate community there.

She said she "immediately felt sorry for" Sartain when she heard of his Vatican assignment "and started praying for him right then and there."

"I believe it is a difficult position to put somebody in," Philippart said. "Anybody who mediates between two groups -- both of whom are very good -- has a hard job coming to the truth."

She and others who have worked with Sartain lauded his administrative style and appreciated his consistent support and a willingness to let them follow their own lights with little if any interference.

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Some might ask if that hands-off tendency could be an element in the furor created in the Joliet diocese when Sartain ordained in June 2009 a seminarian with a history of questionable contact with young men and who reportedly viewed computer images of young-looking males engaged in sex acts.

Seven months later, the new priest, Alejandro Flores, was arrested and charged with child molestation. In September 2010 Flores pled guilty.

While diocesan officials quickly removed Flores from any contact with children and notified authorities when a mother called to complain about Flores' relationship with her son, a Nov. 19, 2011, *Chicago Tribune* story reported, "Critics argue warning signs were ignored or missed while Flores was a seminary student -- a five-year period that mostly occurred under Sartain's watch." Doug Delaney, a Joliet diocesan spokesperson, admitted to the *Tribune* that "in hindsight" Flores should not have been ordained.

NCR's calls and emails to multiple offices of the Joliet diocese were declined or ignored.

In the Seattle archdiocese, director of communication Greg Magnoni said all press inquires were being forwarded to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' media office. In line with that, the archdiocese's

director for religious, Joyce Cox, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, emailed *NCR* that she was "not taking calls or requests for information with this situation at this time."

However, a source with contacts in Joliet said, "Based on my opinion and observation, you are not going to find any dirt on Sartain, partly because he is a good person, and partly because he is too cautious to get into trouble."

"He's a good person who doesn't like to be disliked," the source said, "but he also likes a clean slate. I kind of feel for him, but also see this as a red hat kind of test for him. I feel more sorry for the women who were who identified by the CDF as whose teaching is problematic."

The latter will find "a good listener" in Sartain and a man "who is very approachable, very personal and willing to dialogue," said St. Joseph of Cluny Sr. Mary Glynn, who was Little Rock's director of religious education from 1999 to 2009.

Currently religious education director at Mary Star of the Sea Parish in San Pedro, Calif., Glynn said she was encouraged when she learned the Vatican had picked Sartain as the doctrinal congregation's point man in dealings with LCWR.

She and others like Daughter of Charity Sr. Joan Pytlik expressed confidence in Sartain's fairness.

"I always felt that he listened to what the church has to say and also to the people -- and came out with good, pastoral solutions," said Pytlik, who was the diocesan lobbyist during Sartain's Little Rock years.

Pytlik served a yearlong 1994 internship in Washington, D.C., with NETWORK, a Catholic social justice lobby that was one of two organizations that the doctrinal congregation singled out for investigation of LCWR links. The other was the Resource Center for Religious Institutes, which offers legal and financial expertise to religious orders.

Some observers speculate women religious' widespread support of the Obama health care plan, which the U.S. bishops opposed, might have animated the congregation's move.

Regardless, Pytlik said Sartain "is someone who will be conciliatory and fair and not cause a big controversy. He will work well with people who are involved in the assessment, and work behind the scenes to resolve situations."

Sartain's own limited public comments support Pytlik's view. He has declined to discuss the reform agenda in detail until meeting with LCWR leadership, and he played down charges that differing health care law assessments motivated the doctrinal congregation.

"I think this is a good opportunity to look at different visions of church," said Pytlik, who is now Little Rock's minister for religious. "Maybe the congregation has one vision, and a lot of women religious connected with LCWR have another vision. But they are both of the Spirit, I think, and there is a need for a dialogue and openness on both sides and to come to a deeper understanding of church. It should be a true dialogue, not some top-down type thing. I think it is the role of leadership, servant leadership, to listen to the Spirit and to the people. And I am trusting the church is going to do that and this is a good opportunity to reflect on that."

Pytlik said, "One thing that sticks with everybody who knows [Sartain] is that he knew everybody in the diocese by name. He was back here a few months ago and still calls everybody by name. He is personal. He is a humble man."

Sartain's sister, Sr. Marian Sartain, is secretary-general of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia in Nashville, Tenn. Her order is not affiliated with LCWR but rather is a member of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, which was formed in 1992 and represents about 10,000 women religious in the United States.

[Dan Morris-Young is an *NCR* West Coast correspondent.]

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