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Former LCWR leader gives take on Vatican order

by Joshua J. McElwee



Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane is seen in this *NCR* file photo, taken at a conference of the National Coalition of American Nuns, held in St. Louis Sept., 29, 2009. (*NCR* photo/Tom Fox)

Almost two months later, clarity is still elusive.

Across the country, women religious are still trying to make sense of the Vatican's latest move -- an April order to the organization representing the large majority of their ranks, telling the group to revise and place itself under the control of an archbishop.

For the first time since announcement of the sweeping order, the leadership of that group -- known as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) -- meets this week to discuss what to do next.

While the group has not given many details about the expected contents of the meeting -- scheduled for Tuesday through Friday -- an April release said the national board of the group will meet in an "atmosphere of prayer, contemplation and dialogue" and that it "plans to move slowly, not rushing to judgment."

Among those still trying to understand the implications of the Vatican order as the LCWR board meets this week is Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane.

A former LCWR leader, Kane made headlines across the world when she welcomed Pope John Paul II to the United States in 1979 and pointedly asked him about the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood.

Kane, now an associate professor at Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., first spoke to *NCR* about the Vatican order in a wide-ranging, half-hour-long phone conversation in early May.

Among her reflections then were her initial thoughts on hearing news of the Vatican's move, how she sees it fitting into the larger history between the Vatican and U.S. women religious, and what advice she has for the current LCWR leadership.

Following is that conversation, edited for clarity and length.

***NCR*: What was your initial reaction to the Vatican's order to the LCWR?**

I was shocked but not surprised because I've seen a pattern over the years where LCWR has not been received well at Vatican institutions, certainly including the congregations for religious and doctrine of the faith.

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It just hasn't been a good environment. LCWR has been very faithful about going over to the Vatican once a year, sometimes twice a year. We have spent an enormous amount of our membership money on this whole project, and now we're being asked to do it again. And it's just really not fair to the members.

We've spent a tremendous amount of money and now it seems futile. I was one that said we really need to continue the dialogue, we need to keep on going year after year because they need to hear from us personally.

But I have a sense that they were just quite hostile and almost resented our coming, and were pleased when we went home. It didn't seem to have any effect on them. It's like we put tremendous goodwill and energy into it, and it still seemed to fall on deaf ears.

You mention that the membership has spent a lot of time and money going to Rome, trying to have a conversation. At this point, how do you see that conversation?

Well, I certainly think that the head of this committee and his members should make it a priority to be at the LCWR assembly this summer, because that's when all the members gather together for the annual conference. That's really when they'll have power to make decisions for the future.

I think those men should be at that meeting and it should be a priority and they should attend all of it. We should not be meeting them in Chicago or California and spending our members' money on it. They should be coming to us now.

I think they need to be at the assembly, absolutely. I think our members need to see them, hear from them, and they need to hear from our members. We can't do this in a vacuum.

I also think that my big concern is that there is great hostility toward the LCWR. I think it's probably woven among the American bishops as well as the men in the Vatican, and I don't know how we get through that kind of a blockage.

It just seems to be a real blockage. It's almost as if they really do not like us. And don't appreciate what we've done. And don't see the value and the wisdom to what sisters have been doing all these years.

How does that make you feel?

It's very, very frustrating. I really think it is a gender issue here. It is a matter of the men in the Vatican still thinking they can control the women, especially control the women religious because we are pontifical and we are canonical.

And they don't realize that we have moved to another whole point of tremendous equality and mutuality. And that we have much to say about our future and what's going on.

We're calling for full participation of women in the church. That means that women have to fully participate and have an equal voice. I don't see that reflected in this whole direction. I do think that's a very serious problem.

There's been a number of articles concerning the level of involvement the U.S. bishops had with the Vatican order. How do you feel about the possibility that American bishops were really behind this?

Well, the statement came through the United States' bishops. Basically, the whole thing got channeled through them. So they had to have known it. Now whether they agreed with it or complied with it, I don't know.

Maybe they don't feel like they have any power over it either. Cardinal (Timothy) Dolan, the president of the U.S. bishops, is here in New York, and I haven't heard him say one single word about this. He has said absolutely nothing about it.

I know there was a lot of talk during the apostolic visitation about how much personal energy it takes to deal with these kinds of things. How much energy does it take for sisters to deal with this? Do you just expect this sort of tension with bishops to be a part of your life?

You know, we've had it as part of our life for a long time. We haven't had really good, strong relationships with bishops in many years.

There was a time when U.S. bishops who were working with sisters would come to our assembly, and we really had some good dialogue. And then I think there was a real shift after Pope John Paul II became pope. He wanted sisters to be in their habits, he wanted them to spend their time praying -- that goes back to 1978. I think that he set the groundwork for that.

I think because he came, and I gave the greeting that I did, that it caused a tremendous outpouring. And I think they've been really upset about that all these years. I mean, we're still going back to the question of ordination. And that's basically what I put in the message. And LCWR, in 1975, put in a resolution that said women need to be in all ministries of the church. We're talking about a 30-year history here. And they're still trying to reverse it.

Looking back and knowing what's happened now, would you change what you said then?

I would not change it, no. And, if anything I guess I've realized after I had said it that it was probably much more urgent than I realized at the time. It was a very urgent message for our times.

I think what happened in some aspects of the Catholic community is that we became defensive about it. Even among sisters -- we are still hesitant to talk about ordination. We don't want to upset the priests or bishops too much because we've worked very closely with them for so long. And we have a nice, comfortable relationship.

At this point, what do you think about the idea of LCWR letting go of its canonical recognition and just becoming a voluntary organization?

I think there's some wisdom to looking at the question. The reason I would be uncomfortable with the direction is it's like giving up the power that we have. And I don't really want to do that. I don't think we have a reason to not be pontifical, to not be officially and canonically Catholic.

But at the same time, if we were to really do a discernment on this to decide if it's more harmful to continue as a pontifical organization or not, we may say it is -- that it's taking too much energy, its taking too much time, or we're misdirecting our energies from the service of people.

I wouldn't not want to look at it, but I don't find myself saying that should be our position because I think there are forces in the Vatican and the hierarchy that would be happy if we did it. I really do.

It's almost like you're saying that if you go noncanonical, you remove yourself as the thorn in the Vatican's side.

That's correct. That's absolutely right. And I think that we do give up the power that we've had.

I've been in LCWR since 1970. So I'm in the organization 40 years. I'm not sure that I want it to go that quickly. I really don't. They actually could have taken it away if they wanted to. After five years, that may be part of their plan. But who knows? Between now and then there's much of divine intervention and divine providence that can come along.

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