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LCWR president speaks of pain and process

by Joshua J. McElwee



Franciscan Sister Pat Farrell, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, is pictured in Washington May 29 before the start of the LCWR national board meeting. (CNS photo/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, told *NCR* Friday the group is still discerning whether it can abide "with integrity" a Vatican-ordered revision of the organization's charter, and plans to raise serious questions with church officials during planned meetings later this month in Rome.

In an exclusive fifteen minute interview, Farrell said a special meeting of the group's national board of directors this week found it facing "a gamut of emotions of ups and downs" as it attempted prayerfully to decide the future course for the organization.

Farrell's comments come just hours after LCWR, which represents some 80 percent of U.S. women religious, issued its first official statement in reply to a highly critical doctrinal assessment of the group issued April 18 by the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

The LCWR reply said the Vatican assessment followed a flawed process and charged that it has caused scandal and pain throughout the church.

The Vatican assessment mandates the sisters' group revise its programs, affiliations, and statutes and places it under the direct authority of Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain who will serve officially as the archbishop delegate, giving him wide-ranging authority over the group.

In today's interview, Farrell, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis based in Dubuque, Iowa, addressed the outcome of this week's board meeting, explaining what she plans to say to Vatican officials during conversations in Rome, and whether the sisters' group is considering leaving the church's official canonical structure to reform itself as a non-profit organization.

Following is that interview, lightly edited for context.

NCR::What was mood of the board meeting this week? How did things change over the three days?

Farrell: There was an overall mood of really serious, prayerful reflection, I would say -- a gamut of emotions of ups and downs.

But I would say that the major thing is that it was a real consolation for all of us to finally be together in one place and to be able to process some of the feelings around this, and to share some of the feelings and reactions we've received from women in our regions of LCWR and to finally be able to talk about that face to face. We're all aware of the import and the seriousness of this.

Was there a sense of direction that might have changed at any point during the meeting?

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There's a number of issues that we talked over. And the tone changed in different conversations, but some of the overall things were that we want to speak the truth. We want to respond with integrity. We want to address what really has seemed to us as some misrepresentations of LCWR and of our life in the document that came from the CDF.

And we want to make sure that as we go forward we do not compromise the incredible solidarity we have among ourselves and that we move according to our procedures of gathering the impressions and the input of our members so that we always speak with one voice.

We would also, I think, would like to address issues that seem to us to be sort of an unfair representation of us and our lives, and we want to do so in a way that ultimately contributes to the good of religious life for ourselves and around the world, and for the good of the church.

The statement released this morning, while measured, also uses some stronger language -- using phrases like it's a 'flawed process' that resulted in the Vatican order. What sense was there among the LCWR board that the group needed to answer the order firmly?

I think, first of all, that we want to set the record straight and have an opportunity to have our understanding of ourselves and our issues represented truthfully. And so far the only statement that has

been made public has been from the Vatican.

The prior discourse that we had in this whole doctrinal assessment was always held in confidence. We did have some back and forth written communication. And the verbal communication was more with Bishop Blaire, who was overseeing the process in the name of the CDF in the United States.

So this was really the first public statement that has been made about that. And it clearly represents the Vatican viewpoint. And before we say anything more about our own version of things, we want to have that conversation first with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In the statement, you also say that the Vatican order has caused ?scandal.? What is the nature of the scandal as you see it? How are you defining that?

I think the inference that many people could draw from the publication of the Vatican document is that we are unfaithful, that we are not in communion with the church. We really do not see ourselves in that way.

However, there are genuine questions that we bring -- the conversations that need to happen. And I think the outpouring of support that has been manifested across the country is another manifestation of that. There are conversations and questions that need to happen that are also shared by a lot of the laity of the church.

The insinuation that I think many people could draw from reading that Vatican document is that if we raise those questions, we're unfaithful to the church. That's not true. And I don't think that's really fair. I think, in fact, that that is a sign of our deepest faithfulness to the church -- questions that the people of God need to raise, that we need to talk about together in a climate of genuine dialog.

The climate isn't always there. And we're in a bit of a delicate position with this because we do want to faithfully raise questions of concern, but we do not want to do it in a way that further polarizes. And that's a tricky path to walk.

You've mentioned you're planning to go to Rome to meet with Archbishop Sartain and Cardinal Levada. What do you expect focus of those conversations to be?

From our side of the conversation, we want to clarify what we think are misrepresentations of LCWR and of women religious in the United States. And from there, we don't know how that conversation will unfold.

It really is a continuation of the initial conversation we had when we had our appointment on April 18 with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. And we deliberately gave very little response then because we did not want to do anything off the top of our head without consultation, first of all with a broader section of our membership, and without some thoughtful, prayerful consideration.

This is a continuation of that conversation, in which we're ready to speak more of our genuine response. And we think that needs to happen first with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

You mean you want to bring them into the conversation and not just be talking with Archbishop Sartain?

Well, the document came from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. And statements about us came from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. So we think that's the starting point. And Archbishop Sartain will be present.

Coming off the board meeting, what sense is there among the sisters that you'd be comfortable subjecting your programs to review by three bishops?

Clearly this is an outside control. We would rather not have that.

Again, how this all unfolds is something that we will do together with our membership. And we will take one step at a time and see in conversation to what degree we can enter into this process with integrity.

That's a question that no one of us is going to determine alone. That will be an unfolding process with the 1,500 members of LCWR.

At this point, what kind of support has the idea of LCWR becoming non-canonical garnered? What's the conversation on that like?

Again, that's something we can't respond to without further consultation with our members. But the option always is there.

But it's very important for us as well to be at the table in the conversations within the church that we think need to take place. But we also, I think, are interested in seeing whether it's possible to create the climate of dialog that will allow that to really happen.

On that climate of dialog, what has conversation with Archbishop Sartain been like so far?

You know, we've had very, very little contact. We met with him officially when we were in Rome. He happened to be there also on his ad limina visit. And we had a very lovely, "getting to know you" conversation and that's pretty much what it was.

If you had Pope Benedict in front of you and you could say or ask or tell him anything on this score, what would it be?

We would love to sit down with you personally and talk about this.

What are you saying to sisters who are approaching LCWR and saying they don't understand, or they're really hurt by this? How are you responding to people's feelings?

That's an easy one. We're all hurt by this. I'm not sure any of us understand. It's a very important conversation to have with each other, so we can get past the strong feelings about this and see what is the most helpful kind of response that we can give.

But it's not just the sisters out there. It's the national board, it's all of us. This has deeply saddened religious women around the United States.

You mentioned earlier the show of support by people coming to vigils and the like. What do you say to people who want to show support for sisters at this time?

I think what they can do that is most effective is to, on their part from wherever they are, to also enter into the most open and honest dialog that's possible for them to have in their local church with their local bishops and other people.

The document actually calls for a renewal of LCWR, but our hope is that out of this and out of broad dialog with bishops and laity there could come some renewal for the church in the United States. And that

would be something we would all have to help create together.

We also just want to express our deep gratitude to people around the country and around the world that have shown such immeasurable support for LCWR.

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