NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Franciscan brothers, priests declare support for LCWR

Joshua J. McElwee | Jun. 7, 2012 NCR Today

In what appears to be the first public message of support sent from orders of men religious to U.S. sisters in the face of a sharp Vatican rebuke last April, seven provinces of Franciscan brothers and priests have published an open letter to the sisters, saying the Vatican?s move against them seems ?excessive.?

The letter, dated May 31, was first made public Thursday morning by Jesuit Fr. James Martin over at *America* magazine [1].

Referring to the Vatican?s April move, which ordered the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) to revise and place itself under the authority of three archbishops, the Franciscans write:

> Rather than excessive oversight of LCWR, perhaps a better service to the people of God might be a renewed effort to articulate the nuances of our complex moral tradition. This can be a teaching moment rather than a moment of regulation -- an opportunity to bring our faith to bear on the complexity of public policy particularly in the midst of our quadrennial elections.

Following is a press release which accompanied the letter, and then its full text:

Franciscan Leadership Declares Solidarity With Catholic Sisters
American Provinces Release Letter to the LCWR

NEW YORK -- June 6, 2012 -- As follow-up to the recent Vatican assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the leaders of seven entities of Franciscan friars have released a letter to the Catholic sisters expressing their strong support.

Several weeks ago, the Vatican Congregation for the Defense of the Faith (CDF) released its assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the support system and public voice of some 1500 leaders of women?s congregations, representing over 80% of the women religious in the United States.

This assessment was highly critical of the LCWR and demanded changes in its organization and activities. Like many American Catholics, the friars of Holy Name Province and other communities of Franciscan men across the country have been deeply concerned by this document, especially its impact on their sisters in religious life, many of whom belong to Franciscan congregations.

The provincial ministers of the seven provinces of the Order of Friars Minor in the United States released the following statement to express their appreciation of the invaluable ministry of American religious women and to extend their support to the members of the LCWR, as they attempt to respond to the concerns expressed in the Vatican directives.

May 31, 2012

Open Letter to the United States Catholic Sisters

We, the Leadership of the Friars Minor of the United States, write today as your brothers in the vowed religious life who, like you, have great love for our Church and for the people whom we are privileged to serve. We write at a time of heightened polarization and even animosity in our nation and Church, with deep concern that the recent Vatican Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) may inadvertently fuel the current climate of division and confusion. We write, too, as a public sign of our solidarity with you as you endure this very difficult moment. We are privileged to share with you the journey of religious life. Like you, we strive in all that we do to build up the People of God.

As religious brothers in the Franciscan tradition, we are rooted in a stance of gratitude that flows from awareness of the myriad ways that God is disclosed and made manifest in the world. For us, there can be no dispute that God has been and continues to be revealed through the faithful (and often unsung) witness of religious women in the United States. Thus we note with appreciation that the Congregation for the Defense of the Faith (CDF) ?acknowledges with gratitude the great contributions of women Religious to the Church of the United States as seen particularly in the many schools, hospitals, and institutions of support for the poor which have been founded and staffed by Religious over the years.? We certainly know how much our service has been enriched by the many gifts you bring to these ministries.

However, your gift to the Church is not only one of service, but also one of courageous discernment. The late 20th century and the beginning of this century have been times of great social, political and cultural upheaval and change. Such contextual changes require us, as faithful members of the Church, to pose questions that at first may appear to be controversial or even unfaithful, but in fact are asked precisely so that we might live authentically the charisms we have received, even as we respond to the ?signs of the times.? This is the charge that we as religious have received through the ?Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life? from the Second Vatican Council and subsequent statements of the Church on religious life. We believe that your willingness to reflect on many of the questions faced by contemporary society is an expression of your determination to be faithful to the Gospel, the Church, the invitation from Vatican II and your own religious charisms. We remain thankful for and edified by your courage to engage in such reflection despite the ever-present risk of misunderstanding.

Moreover, we are concerned that the tone and direction set forth in the Doctrinal Assessment of LCWR are excessive, given the evidence raised. The efforts of LCWR to facilitate honest and faithful dialogue on critical issues of our times must not result in a level of ecclesial oversight that could, in effect, quash all further discernment. Further, questioning your adherence to Church teaching by your ?remaining silent? on certain ethical issues seems to us a charge that could be leveled against many groups in the Church, and fails to appreciate both the larger cultural context and the particular parameters of expertise within which we all operate. Finally, when there appears to be honest disagreement on the application of moral principles to public policy, it is not equivalent to questioning the authority of the Church?s magisterium. Although the Catholic moral tradition speaks of agreement regarding moral principles, it also ? from the Middle Ages through today ? speaks of appropriate disagreement regarding specific application of these principles. Unfortunately, the public communications media in the U.S. may not recognize this distinction. Rather than excessive oversight of LCWR, perhaps a better service to the people of God might be a renewed effort to articulate the nuances of our complex moral tradition. This can be a teaching moment rather than a moment of regulation -- an opportunity to bring our faith to bear on the complexity of public policy particularly in the midst of our quadrennial elections.

Finally, we realize and appreciate, as we are sure do you, the proper and right role of the bishops as it is set out in Mutuae Relationes to provide leadership and guidance to religious institutions.[i]
However, the same document clearly states:

> since it is of utmost importance that the council of major superiors collaborate diligently and in a spirit of trust with episcopal conferences, ?it is desirable that questions having reference to both bishops and religious should be dealt with by mixed commissions consisting of bishops and major religious superiors, men or women. ?Such a mixed commission should be structured in such a way that even if the right of ultimate decision making is to be always left to councils or conferences, according to the respective competencies, it can, as an organism of mutual counsel, liaison, communication, study and reflection, achieve its purpose. (#63)

We trust that CDF was attempting to follow their counsel from Mutuae Relationes; however, we fear that in today?s public media world their action easily could be misunderstood. We hope that our bishops will take particular care to see that the way they take action is as important as the actions themselves in serving the People of God. Otherwise, their efforts will surely be misunderstood and polarizing.

Lastly, we appreciate the approach that you at LCWR have taken to enter into a time of discernment, rather than immediately making public statements that could be construed as ?opposing the bishops? after the release of the Doctrinal Assessment. The rancor and incivility of public conversation in the United States at this time make the possibility of productive dialogue more difficult to achieve. We pray that the future conversation between LCWR and CDF might provide an example to the larger world of respectful, civil dialog. Such dialog will require a degree of mutuality, trust and honesty that is absent from much of our world. We trust that you will continue your efforts to live out this principle, and we trust and pray that our bishops will do the same.

Please be assured of our on-going support, prayers, respect, and gratitude for your living example of the following of Christ in our times.

Fraternally,

Leadership of Franciscan (O.F.M.) Provinces of the United States

Assumption BVM Province
Franklin, WI, U.S.A.

Holy Name Province
New York, NY, U.S.A.

Immaculate Conception Province
New York, NY, U.S.A.

Our Lady of Guadalupe Province
Albuquerque, NM, U.S.A.

Sacred Heart Province
St. Louis, MO, U.S.A.

Saint Barbara Province
Oakland, CA, U.S.A.

Saint John the Baptist Province

Cincinnati, OH, U.S.A.

[1]Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, Directives for the Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church, Rome, May 14, 1978

Source URL (retrieved on *03/30/2017 - 14:24*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/franciscan-brothers-priests-declare-support-lcwr

Links:
[1] http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&entry_id=5171