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Editorial: Clash between LCWR and bishops about culture, not theology

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

It's as bad as we thought it could get. Maybe worse. In an interview with *NCR* shortly after meeting with the leaders of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, confirmed our worst fears: that this Holy Office is hell-bent on bringing U.S. women religious to heel.

Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, president of the leadership conference, and St. Joseph Sr. Janet Mock, the group's executive director, went to Rome at the request of the conference's board to seek some understanding from Levada and Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the apostolic delegate, about the April 18 Vatican order that the women's group revise its statutes and programs. The Vatican order, which followed a nearly four-year investigation of the group, also appointed three bishops to oversee this reform: Sartain, Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, and Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill.

Farrell and Mock were hopeful going into the meeting, calling it a continuation of a conversation already begun. On the other side of the meeting, Levada wondered if he were engaged in a "dialogue of the deaf." He's not convinced that the women's group is taking the Vatican's concerns to heart.

In his interview with *NCR*, Levada listed as "substantive issues" of the Vatican critique the publication of an interview with Fr. Charles Curran, a moral theologian censured by the Vatican in the 1980s for his views on sexual morality, in a recent issue of LCWR's *Occasional Papers*, and inviting Barbara Marx Hubbard, often described as a "New Age leader," to address the upcoming August assembly meeting. He also objected to the group's honoring Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders, another theologian sometimes critical of Vatican policy.

"Too many people crossing the LCWR screen, who are supposedly representing the Catholic church, aren't representing the church with any reasonable sense of product identity," Levada said.

That might qualify as one of the more bizarre assertions by a Vatican official in recent memory -- Madison Avenue meets the church -- that somehow the pursuit of holiness conforms to a certain "branding" process.

Levada's language, however, betrays more than a discontent with some Catholic distribution point that's messing with "product identity." What he really would like to see, he said, in suggesting that the Vatican might put in place an alternative group to lead religious women in the United States, is a group "that would focus on the priorities of religious life, the life of holiness, which is the fundamental call of all of us in the church."

That we're all called to a life of holiness is beyond dispute. The rub, of course, comes in the inferences to be drawn from the rest of that statement regarding how that life should be lived and what its priorities should be for women religious in the United States. In one breath, Levada and others speak of a desire for dialogue with the women. In another, they make clear that unless LCWR concedes to Vatican reforms, subjects its programs and speakers to the oversight of men, it will be replaced by another group established by the Vatican.

The question, then, is clearly whether the vision for religious life among women in the United States, how they should understand and live it, is most completely and correctly held by the men in the Vatican.

Dialogue presumes a parity among the partners, that each is open to being persuaded of the other's point of view, that different sides see value in and respect the other. On that point, the cardinal isn't really interested in dialogue. His words can only be taken as an ultimatum in which power trumps all and the noncompliant are made to know they've lost.

We've made the point before on this page that this contretemps between the sisters and the bishops is more a clash of cultures than a clash over theology or doctrine. The Vatican needs to get an interpreter, because these two groups aren't speaking the same language. The difference in cultures has never been so stark. The men in the Vatican, so deeply compromised by scandal of their own making, are trying to reassert authority by making this a dispute over theology and doctrine. It's not primarily that. It's mostly a dispute over power and how people perceive the church: as either a checklist of rules and orthodoxies or a pursuit of truth and holiness lived out amid life's realities and most profoundly on its margins.

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If the bishops are listening at all, watching the persistent show of support for the sisters, they're aware of which path much of the community is prepared to follow.

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