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LCWR: Vatican meeting 'difficult,' with 'differing perspectives'

by Joshua J. McElwee

NCR Today

A meeting last week between Vatican officials and leaders of the organization representing most U.S. women religious was "difficult" because of "differing perspectives" the two sides have over a harsh Vatican critique of the sisters' group, the organization said in a statement Monday morning.

The statement, issued by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), is the first from the group since a meeting in Rome June 12 between its leaders and Cardinal William Levada, the head of the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

It was that congregation which in April ordered LCWR, which represents some 80 percent of U.S. women religious, to revise its statutes, programs and affiliations and place itself under the authority of Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain.

Monday's statement says that following their meeting with Levada and Sartain, LCWR's president, Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, and executive director, St. Joseph Sr. Janet Mock, spoke to LCWR board members June 15 about the event.

The statement says that Farrell and Mock told the board the meeting was "difficult."

"While the LCWR officers reported that they were able to express their concerns during the meeting with openness and honesty, they acknowledged that the meeting was difficult because of the differing perspectives the CDF officials and the LCWR representatives hold on the matters raised in the report," reads the statement.

Monday's statement follows pointed remarks from Levada about the meeting, who told *NCR* June 12, it could signal a possible "dialogue of the deaf" between the sisters' group and the Vatican.

Monday's statement from LCWR also makes reference to what seems to be a concerted effort on behalf of several bishops to shift focus of the critique from appearing as an indictment of all U.S. women religious to simply the work of LCWR.

"Since the release of the findings in April, some Vatican officials and US bishops have publicly claimed that the report is not a reflection on all US Catholic sisters and is directed only to LCWR, the organization of leaders," reads the LCWR statement.

"The board noted that the actions of CDF are keenly felt by the vast majority of Catholic sisters who have elected, and therefore feel a close identity with, their leaders. Moreover, the statements and gestures of solidarity from men religious and from conferences of Catholic sisters in other countries, as well as the letters and petitions from thousands of lay supporters worldwide, indicate that many others are also concerned about how to live as people of faith in the complexities of these times."

Ending their statement by saying that the concerns shared with the group from others in the church will be "part of the conference's discernment of its response to the CDF report," LCWR says it plans to continue "careful, prayerful discernment" on the matter in coming months, leading up to its annual assembly in August.

The matter of the messaging of the Vatican's critique came up at the U.S. bishops' annual meeting in Atlanta last week. During a prolonged debate over whether the bishops should hire a chief spokesperson, Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley cited what he called the public relations "debacle" over the LCWR matter as need to hire someone in that role.

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An attempt to shift the tone from the bishops regarding the LCWR order -- which follows a widespread showing of support for Catholic sisters in the light of the Vatican's move -- was also seen in statements from Sartain and Bishop Leonard Blair of the Toledo diocese, who was appointed along with Springfield, Ill., Bishop Thomas Paprocki, to help Sartain in his role overseeing LCWR.

In an interview with *NCR* June 13, Sartain said the Vatican's order was "about the LCWR, not about specific religious congregations or individuals."

In a June 8 column in the Toledo diocesan paper, Blair said the critique is not addressed to the "thousands of religious sisters in our country? to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude for all that they do in witness to the Gospel," but to "the particular organization known as the LCWR."

First news of the Vatican's order to LCWR came in a press release from the U.S. bishops' conference April 18, which announced that the Vatican congregation had given the order for the group's revision.

The congregation had begun an investigation of the group, known as a "doctrinal assessment," in 2009. The release from the bishops' conference also stated that Sartain had been appointed "archbishop delegate" for LCWR and had been granted wide-ranging authority over the group.

According to the April 18 document from the Vatican congregation, Sartain is to be given authority over

LCWR in five areas, including revision of its statues, plans and programs, and "offering guidance on the application of liturgical texts."

That letter also identified three major areas of concern the congregation had with the sisters' group, including supposed "corporate dissent" in the congregation regarding the church's sexual teachings and a supposed "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" present in some of the organizations programs and presentations.

Following is the entire statement from LCWR:

The board members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) held a special session on Friday night, June 15, where they were briefed by conference president Sister Pat Farrell, OSF and executive director Sister Janet Mock, CSJ on their June 12 meeting in Rome with officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The LCWR leaders had requested the meeting at the Vatican to address their concerns about the doctrinal assessment report of LCWR conducted by CDF and released on April 18.

While the LCWR officers reported that they were able to express their concerns during the meeting with openness and honesty, they acknowledged that the meeting was difficult because of the differing perspectives the CDF officials and the LCWR representatives hold on the matters raised in the report.

Since the release of the findings in April, some Vatican officials and US bishops have publicly claimed that the report is not a reflection on all US Catholic sisters and is directed only to LCWR, the organization of leaders. The board noted that the actions of CDF are keenly felt by the vast majority of Catholic sisters who have elected, and therefore feel a close identity with, their leaders. Moreover, the statements and gestures of solidarity from men religious and from conferences of Catholic sisters in other countries, as well as the letters and petitions from thousands of lay supporters worldwide, indicate that many others are also concerned about how to live as people of faith in the complexities of these times. The concerns they have shared with LCWR will be part of the conference's discernment of its response to the CDF report.

LCWR members will continue their careful, prayerful discernment in their geographic regions throughout June and July, and at LCWR's annual assembly in August.

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