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LCWR president 'not sure' of what comes next



Franciscan Sister Pat Farrell, right, LCWR president, and St. Joseph Sister Janet Mock, left, the organization's executive director, speak to journalists outside the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican June 12. (CNS photo/Giancarlo Giuliani, Catholic Press Photo)

Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, told *NCR* on Monday she's "not sure" of the best way for her group to continue its conversations with Vatican officials regarding their order that the group revise and place itself under the control of three bishops.

In a 10-minute interview, Farrell said Friday's conversation with the LCWR board following a meeting with Vatican officials had an atmosphere of "sober attentiveness" as the group decides "our best way forward together in this."

Farrell's comments come just hours after LCWR, which represents some 80 percent of U.S. women religious, issued its first statement after the June 12 meeting between Farrell and St. Joseph Janet Mock, LCWR's executive director, and Cardinal William Levada, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, who has been given wide-ranging authority over the sisters' group.

That statement said while the Rome meeting saw "open" discussions between the four, it also was

"difficult" because of "differing perspectives" the two sides have over the Vatican's assessment of the group. For the full LCWR statement, see: LCWR: Vatican meeting 'difficult,' with 'differing perspectives'

The Vatican assessment mandates the sisters' group revise its programs, affiliations, and statutes and places it under the direct authority of Sartain, who will serve officially as the "archbishop delegate" along with two other bishops.

In an interview June 12, Levada also spoke of difficulties between Vatican officials and the LCWR, saying he fears a possible "dialogue of the deaf," reflected in what he sees as a lack of movement on the Vatican's concerns. For the full Levada interview, see: Levada talks LCWR, criticism in the States.

In Monday's interview, Farrell, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis based in Dubuque, Iowa, addressed her discussion with the LCWR board, explained how she sees the discussion between CDF and LCWR in the larger context of the church since Vatican II, and said what she might say to Pope Benedict if given the chance to speak to the pontiff.

Following is that interview, in full.

NCR: I understand that today's statement from LCWR comes after you spoke with your board members about the meeting in Rome with Levada and Sartain. Can you talk to me about the tenor of your conversation with the board members? How did they receive news of the meeting? What was the general feeling?

Farrell: Well, clearly, we all have a great awareness of what's going on, not just for LCWR, but for the wider church. So there was, I would say, a tenor of sober attentiveness and of a great desire to together continue to listen to the spirit to discern what is our best way forward together in this.

Did they give you any specific advice for how to continue to go forward from here?

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As our way of being as women religious and within LCWR, honest and open dialogue is our first course of action. But the first step in that is to always do that with our members. And so our next step of course is to now gather the fifteen geographical regions of members of LCWR and to provide through the chairpersons on the national board a venue where they can begin to express their own reactions and feelings and to process some of the information that we have. And then of course we'll take that to our national assembly in St. Louis and see together where to go from there.

You mention that the first course of action is honest and open dialogue. The statement this morning referred to the discussion with Cardinal Levada and Archbishop Sartain as "difficult," specifically because of "differing perspectives" on the matter. What's the nature of that difficulty?

Precisely that, that we have differing perspectives -- about the church and our role in the church, and the role of laity in the church. And what it means to be faithful to the church. We have never considered ourselves in any way unfaithful to the church, but if questioning is interpreted as defiance that puts us in a very difficult position.

And I think together with people around the country who have been supportive of us, our desire is to do what we can, for their sake and for ours, to help create a safe and respectful environment, where together with church leaders we can raise questions openly and search for truth freely, addressing some of the complex issues of our times.

But that can only take place in a climate of mutual trust. And it's our hope that we can take steps to move towards that in deeper ways.

In that context of wanting to have fruitful conversations, what do you think needs to be done to make that happen between CDF and LCWR? How can the conversation continue in a positive light? How can the two groups understand each other better?

I'm really not sure what the best way to go about that is. What needs to happen is that somehow we need to get beneath the polarizations out of which we're speaking to one another. I'm really not sure how best to do that. Maybe that's a discussion that needs to take place. I'm very sure though that this is bigger than LCWR.

You've mentioned a couple of times that you view the discussion about LCWR as part of bigger questioning inside the church among the faithful. How do you see that? What's the bigger context? What's the scope of that?

Well, I think that what many of us are sensing is that in the last fifty years the spirit of the Second Vatican Council has been taken back, bit by bit. The effect of that, I think, has been keenly felt in many sections of the church, certainly by religious, but I think by a large number of laity. That movement, in some way, describes what we're experiencing as the polarization in the church.

The Second Vatican Council invited us to respond to the signs of the times. The Second Vatican Council invited openness to the world. Rather than judging what's happening in history and in the world around us as a kind of a secularism to be rejected, I think the Second Vatican Council invited us to see what is unfolding in history and in the pain and the joys of the human family as something of the presence of God. As a place where we need God. I think religious have taken that seriously.

I'm sorry to narrow the discussion back down a bit, but I know that in an interview with NCR last week, Cardinal Levada warned of a "dialogue of the deaf" between CDF and LCWR. How did that reference make you feel about the process with LCWR? What does that mean for the shape of things as they go forward?

Well, I think, if in talking about the dialogue of the deaf, if what Cardinal Levada meant was that we weren't listening, I find that an unfortunate comment. Because I think we made our best, good faith effort to speak and to listen. And to listen not only to CDF, but to those we serve.

If, on the other hand, that's a way of naming what is the situation in the church right now of different perspectives trying to speak to one another and be heard, I think that's -- we're all struggling to know how to get beneath the polarizations that keep us from a meeting of the minds.

The last time we spoke, I asked that if you had a chance to speak to Pope Benedict what you might say, ask or tell him. Do you have a different answer now?

Well, I think I would invite him, with us, to take the long view in this, with the attitude of the Gospel that what is of God will endure and what is not of God won't.

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