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LCWR interview a breath of journalistic \"Fresh Air\"

Heidi Schlumpf | Jul. 18, 2012 NCR Today

Thousands of new listeners tuned in to National Public Radio yesterday to hear Sister Pat Farrell, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), in a 40-minute interview [1] on the program ?Fresh Air.? As of today, the show is still NPR?s ?most recommended? story with 250 ?recommends? and more than 10,000 links on Facebook.

While I was very interested in what Farrell had to say, I also was listening closely to the interviewer. I?m a regular listener and big fan of host Terry Gross. In fact, I consider her one of the best interviewers in journalism today and use her as a positive example when teaching interviewing to journalism and communication students.

Gross is always prepared and knowledgeable, no matter the subject, and has a way of asking hard-hitting questions while still being sensitive and human. Her interview [2]with children?s author Maurice Sendak made me cry and was shared widely after his recent death.

Once again, she (and her producers, presumably) did their homework before yesterday?s interview. Gross set up the current situation without editorializing, then simply asked Farrell to respond to the Vatican?s doctrinal assessment, quoting extensively from the document.

A couple of times, she tried to summarize Farrell?s answer, but was careful to say, ?Correct me if I?m wrong, ?I don?t want to put words in your mouth? and ?What I think I hear you saying?? She did ask a question that mentioned how those investigating the nuns, specifically Cardinal William Levada, had been accused of their own scandal, namely reassigning priest sex abusers.

She once mistakenly called the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith the ?Congregation for the Defense of the Faith.?

Still, Gross did a solid, professional journalistic job in asking probing questions about the LCWR?s positions and history, all while?and this a rarity in media today?giving Farrell plenty of time to give thoughtful answers instead of sound bites.

Toward the end of the interview, she did offer her opinion and observations when she noted that she heard ?conflict and pain? from Farrell as she tried ?to stay within the church while at the same time having a questioning mind.?

She also pointed out the irony that three men will now oversee a group that has asked for more openness toward women and their leadership.

Finally, Gross asked a question she says she poses to all religious women: ?Why would you want to stay in an institution that doesn?t think of you as equal or worthy as equal???perhaps revealing some of her own feelings about organized religion. Gross was born into a Jewish family but rarely speaks publicly about her own religious beliefs or practices.

For those wondering if the other side will have its chance to respond, Gross announced she will be interviewing Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, one of three bishops named to oversee the ?reform? of the LCWR, next week.

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Links:
[1] http://www.npr.org/2012/07/17/156858223/an-american-nun-responds-to-vatican-condemnation
[2] http://www.npr.org/2012/05/08/152248901/fresh-air-remembers-author-maurice-sendak