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It was \"fresh air!\" with Sr. Pat Farrell

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NCR Today

On July 17, Franciscan Sr. Patricia Farrell, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), had some refreshing words in a church that needs a breath of "fresh air."

She was being interviewed by Terry Gross, host of Fresh Air -- a program broadcasted on many National Public Radio stations -- on the Vatican "assessment" of LCWR and the possible responses of LCWR when it holds its annual assembly in mid-August.

In light of that document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Farrell wondered out loud whether one can "be a Catholic and have a questioning mind," and she questioned whether "freedom of conscience in the church [is] genuinely honored."

She defended LCWR members' periodic letters to the Vatican on issues of sexuality, including gay/lesbian issues, saying, "We have been in good faith raising concerns about some of the church's teaching on sexuality. The teaching and interpretation of the faith can't remain static and really needs to be reformulated, rethought in light of the world we live in and new questions, new realities as they arise." That sounds to me like what Bishop Geoffrey Robinson of Australia has been saying. And listening closely, one can hear in those sentences the spirit of Vatican II.

When the question turned to abortion, she described the work of U.S. women religious as "very much pro-life." But she did not dodge tough issues when she said, "We would question, however, any policy that is more pro-fetus than actually pro-life. You know, if the rights of the unborn trump all the rights of all those who are already born, that is a distortion, too."

When Gross asked about LCWR's response to the Vatican, Farrell said -- as expected -- that LCWR was still in the "process of gathering the perspective of all our members" in anticipation of its assembly.

Asked about the organization's options, she said "some of the options would be to just comply with the mandate ? or to say we can't comply with this and see what the Vatican does ? or to remove ourselves [and] form a separate organization or, hopefully, in my mind, to see if we can somehow, in a spirit of nonviolent strategizing, look for some maybe third way that refuses to just define the mandate and the issues in such black-and-white terms."

First, it was wonderful to hear someone in Farrell's position speaking forthrightly on the most contentious issues in the church. She is one courageous woman.

But I hope she doesn't wrestle very long with that last option she posed. I too wish the Vatican did not see issues in black and white. I too wish that the Vatican could enter into a dialogue with LCWR on an equal basis. But, short of a direct intervention by the Holy Spirit, that's not likely to happen.

This may be the time that LCWR is called to speak prophetically -- and lovingly -- with a decision that honors the value Farrell believes is endangered in the church: freedom of conscience -- in this case, for American women religious.

If LCWR does indeed speak prophetically, "Catholics in the pews" will, I predict, offer their full-throated support ? because they too have questioning minds, and freedom of conscience is their issue too.

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To listen to Sr. Pat Farrell's full interview on Fresh Air, click on this link.

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