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At LCWR assembly, sisters contemplate surrender, discernment, authority

by Joshua J. McElwee

ST. LOUIS -- Discussions Thursday at the meeting of about 900 representatives of U.S. Catholic sisters turned to deeper reflections on the meaning of religious life after a Vatican order.

A late-morning press briefing at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious assembly featured three sisters who were scheduled to speak on the roles of contemplation and dialogue in religious life but shifted to the subjects of surrender, discernment and authority.

Defining contemplation as a "long, loving look at the real," Mercy Sr. Mary Waskowiak said the sisters "are trying to take a long, loving look at the reality before us right now."

Waskowiak also addressed the concept of discernment, which she said can be simplified as "muddling through."

Ultimately, she said, the questions for LCWR are: "What is it the church is really asking of us? Where do we sense God's call?"

She said LCWR's discussions this week about the April 18 rebuke from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which orders the group to reform and place itself under the authority of three U.S. bishops, might not result in an "avenue of action," but "we are asking God to show us together the next best step we can take."

St. Joseph Sr. Mary Pellegrino, who serves as the congregational moderator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Penn., focused on the meaning of dialogue, calling it "a way forward."

Pellegrino said she thought the sisters "have an incredible opportunity right now" in their use of dialogue "to model something different in the experience of deep pain and hurt and potential impacts, to model something different for our culture, for our politics, and for the mystical body of Christ who is waiting for something more from us."

The sisters opened Thursday at the conference with a prayer focused on the notion of surrendering to "something bigger than me."

During the prayer, organizers played a clip from the film "Of Gods and Men," which tells the story of seven Trappist monks who were kidnapped and assassinated during the Algerian Civil War in 1996.

In the clip, the audience sees the monks sit down for their final dinner before the kidnapping. The camera focuses on the faces of each of them as they share their last meal before the kidnapping -- showing the actors' portrayal of their conflicting emotions of joy, sorrow and contentment.

The clip came up in questioning later at the press briefing, when the three sisters were asked why many sisters seemed to be crying during the clip and if that had anything to do with their feelings regarding the Vatican mandate.

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Waskowiak said her tears were "tears of joy" centered around questions, including, "What does it mean to surrender? What is truly being asked of me, truly being asked of us?"

"It's deeper and bigger than the mandate," she said. "I really believe that. It puts me in touch with the question of what am I really willing to die for? What will this cost?"

Following the sessions Thursday morning, the sisters were to meet in a closed-door executive session to discuss their possible response to the Vatican mandate.

Before one of those sessions, which are open only to LCWR members, Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, LCWR's president, said while the group values transparency, it asked members to treat those sessions as confidential.

Farrell also asked members who "cannot understand or perceive confidentiality as anything other than total transparency" to consider "not coming to the executive sessions, not in the interest of ever excluding anyone, but in creating the kind of environment we need to really discern with each other in freedom and openness."

At the end of their session Thursday morning, Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, LCWR's president-elect who will become president in a ceremony Friday, told those gathered to bring the Vatican's mandate to Thursday's afternoon session "for considered study."

In a brief conversation with *NCR* before Thursday's session, St. Joseph Sr. Kit Gray, one of two sisters asked to serve as facilitators for the process, said it was "going well" and that it had been easier to "keep people on track" than she had first expected.

On a table outside the room where the sisters host their discussion sessions, organizers have placed a number of cards written to LCWR members in support of the group.

One, written from a former novice in a Franciscan order and accompanied with picture of her in full habit in 1965, reads "I am standing with you!"

"I'll be praying for all of you during your meeting," the card continues. "May the spirit bring wisdom, justice, and peace."

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- **Sisters contemplate surrender, discernment, authority**, Aug. 10
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