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LCWR: Meeting with Vatican-appointed bishops 'open,' 'cordial'

by Joshua J. McElwee

NCR Today

A meeting between leaders of U.S. Catholic sisters and three U.S. bishops appointed by the Vatican to overhaul the sisters' main representative organization was "open" and "cordial," the group said in a statement Monday afternoon.

Four officers of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about 80 percent of women religious in the U.S., met Sunday with Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain; Springfield, Ill., Bishop Thomas Paprocki; and Toledo, Ohio, Bishop Leonard Blair.

Sartain, who met previously with the LCWR board after the group's annual meeting in August, was appointed by the Vatican in April to be the group's "archbishop delegate." Paprocki and Blair were appointed his assistants in the process.

In a formal report announcing the move April 18, known as a "doctrinal assessment," the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith alleged there was a "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes" in LCWR's programs. It gave Sartain authority to revise LCWR's statutes and review its plans and programs.

LCWR leaders have disagreed with the Vatican's portrayal of their group, saying in June it came about from a flawed process and has caused "scandal and pain throughout the church." They have also sought to initiate a process of dialogue on the matter.

Sunday's meeting, the first time LCWR leaders met in person with all three of the overseeing bishops, likely afforded an opportunity for both groups to determine if such dialogue is possible.

While Sartain has been measured in statements regarding his role with LCWR, saying in a June interview with *NCR* he wants to "build relationships," Paprocki and Blair have been more outspoken.

Blair, who undertook the "doctrinal assessment" that led to LCWR's ordered revision, alleged in a June interview on the NPR show "Fresh Air" that the sisters are "promoting, unilaterally ... a new kind of theology that is not in accordance with the faith of the church."

Monday's statement from LCWR was made jointly by Sartain and Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, LCWR's president.

It comes two days after Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, the immediate past president of the group, was honored Saturday by the national church reform group Call to Action at their annual meeting for her and LCWR's leadership since the Vatican's April move.

Accepting Call to Action's Leadership Award on Saturday, Farrell thanked the many lay Catholics who expressed support for her group.

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Since April, such support for the sisters has been widespread, with vigils being held in cities across the country, supportive editorials written in a number of national news outlets, and even authoring of two congressional resolutions expressing the "deepest appreciation" for the sisters' work.

"Your solidarity with women religious has been overwhelmingly significant for us and for the church," said Farrell at CTA's meeting in Louisville, Ky.

"So please hear in my own expression of gratitude the voices of thousands of women religious all over the country who are very appreciative of your gestures of encouragement: the vigils, the prayers, the letters. You have spoken. You have stood with us. You have affirmed and strengthened us and that has made all the difference."

Sunday's meeting between LCWR and the three bishops took place in Baltimore on the eve of the annual meeting of the U.S. bishops, being held there Monday through Wednesday.

Following is the full statement from LCWR:

Archbishop J. Peter Sartain and LCWR president Sister Florence Deacon, OSF, have issued the following statement:

The three bishop delegates of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, Bishop Leonard P. Blair, and Bishop Thomas John Paprocki; the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), Sister Florence Deacon, OSF; Sister Pat Farrell, OSF; and Sister Carol Zinn, SSJ; and LCWR executive director, Sister Janet Mock, CSJ, met Sunday, November 11, for preliminary discussions about the doctrinal assessment of LCWR by the CDF.

The discussion was open and cordial and those present agreed to meet again to continue the conversation.

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