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Papal resignation puts Vatican LCWR mandate in question

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NCR Today

With the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI at 8:00 p.m. tomorrow Rome time his pontificate comes to an end, Roman curial heads resign, and the Vatican shuts down.

We all become adults again, at least until we have a new Holy Father.

But that's not all. The old guard, those Vatican prelates who colluded to force an outrageous investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and who ordered LCWR into a receivership until it mends its ways, are out.

They will have no authority to continue their work, pending a new dictate by a new pope.

In turn, any authority of Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain, who officially serves as "archbishop delegate" to LCWR, ends as well.

After tomorrow the chair of the bishop of Rome becomes empty and we enter a period known in Latin as *sede vacante*, the seat being absent.

In his Apostolic Constitution promulgated in 1996, late pope John Paul II decreed that all senior leaders of the Roman Curia—effectively the government of the Catholic Church—has to resign when the pope steps down.

Among those resigning will be Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, secretary of state—effectively the Vatican's

number two job. He will remain only as Camerlengo (Chamberlain).

The Camerlengo has traditionally had the role of officially certifying the death of a pope—he used to do so by striking the pontiff's forehead on his deathbed with a special silver hammer and calling out the words "Holy Father".

He is also the Vatican official charged with destroying the pontiff's "Fisherman's Ring"—a gold signet ring—in order to prevent the use of the official seal on any counterfeit documents issued in the pope's name.

Among those required to resign will be Archbishop Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who, when he took the appointment last July, inherited the congregation's sanctions against LCWR.

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It was last April that the CDF released its critical doctrinal assessment, after years of secret study, of LCWR. Among the findings the congregation identified were a "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" in LCWR's programs and "corporate dissent" in the group regarding the church's sexual teachings.

According to the Vatican mandate, LCWR has been placed under the authority of Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain, who officially serves as "archbishop delegate" for the group.

Turns out Sartain, beginning tomorrow, has no one to report to. The mandate Sartain received from the congregation came from a CDF under the pontificate of Benedict. That pontificate is ending.

At a minimum, it seems, LCWR's receivership ends tomorrow — either temporarily, or permanently.

Any continued Vatican move against LCWR (and the mandate has been a highly controversial one and widely protested by the U.S. laity) would certainly need the affirmation of the next pontiff before going forward.

The U.S. women religious, it might be said, have a reprieve, a first step toward righting a serious Vatican inflicted injustice.

This would be a narrow understanding of the situation.

More accurately, the new pope and Vatican curia have a unique opportunity to end a divisive, dispiriting, fruitless, and deeply hurtful action, and in the process, recover a modicum of trust and credibility.

Among the many challenges facing the next pontiff is the challenge to heal the church by moving away from repeated judgments on what constitutes Catholic orthodoxy, and in place, preach the Gospels at the top of their voices with every new breath and in every new act.

Women religious, once again, you could become the means of much needed reconciliation.

Were Vatican actions against our women religious to end, it seems, no one might be more relieved than Archbishop Sartain.

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