

## Editorial: Pope Francis should meet with the sisters

NCR Editorial Staff | Apr. 22, 2013

The sister's voice cracked with emotion as she explained her disappointment. She and the sisters in her community were "sad, so sad" when they heard the news from the Vatican April 15 that Pope Francis had "reaffirmed" the conclusions of the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the program of reform ordered last year by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Was this the dose of cold reality -- the other shoe falling -- that would signal that despite all the lovely symbolism of this young papacy, over the long haul the status quo would prevail? We fully understand the sadness the sister who called *NCR* expressed. Women religious in the United States have been ill-treated over the last four years, targets of a humiliating and, in the end, unjust takeover of their leadership organization. The Vatican has attempted to place their fate in the hands of three men, none of whom has experienced life in a religious community. Their dioceses have only benefited from the work of sisters who increasingly are the last vestige of Catholic presence in some of the most neglected corners of our cities. They stay where others -- priests and bishops among them -- have fled.

We also know the LCWR leadership has spent many hours and considerable resources to convey the nature of their organization and the work and lives of the women religious so that church figures better understand why the women feel they have been so unjustly treated.

Before drawing conclusions about what the latest word from the congregation means, we would do well to determine what it is that we know. We know Archbishop Gerhard Müller said he talked with Francis about the doctrinal assessment of LCWR. We don't know what Müller said to the pope or how detailed a discussion they had. We don't know if this was their sole topic of discussion or one topic among many, or of its importance in that conversation. We don't know, finally, whether Müller's leadership of the congregation is now a temporary matter.

The April 15 meeting with Müller, the LCWR leadership and Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the Vatican-appointed delegate overseeing the reform of LCWR, was the first time this group has met. The doctrinal assessment is an inherited problem for Müller, who was named prefect of the doctrinal congregation only in July.

As this editorial was being written, LCWR had not yet met with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, which has been dealing with a parallel "apostolic visitation" of U.S. women religious. That investigation began under the auspices of leaders in that congregation who have since left. Cardinal João Bráz de Aviz and his former secretary, Joseph Tobin -- now archbishop of Indianapolis -- showed they were working for a way to resolve that confrontation amicably and respectfully. The hope still remains that the doctrinal congregation will take an approach akin to Bráz de Aviz. We don't know. Francis' first high-level appointment was Franciscan Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo as the new No. 2 at the congregation for religious, an appointment that has been well-received.

The unanswered questions extend to exactly what Francis said to Müller or what he might have said to Bráz de Aviz about the American sisters, for that matter. He has been meeting with all dicastery heads in the days since his election. We also don't know what will result from the "reflection, prayer and dialogue" he said he would undertake "before any definitive nominations or confirmations" are made to the Curia. And yet unknown is what will result from the work of the eight cardinals from around the world he appointed to "advise him on the government of the universal church" and "to study a project of revision" of the Roman Curia.

More than a few experienced Vatican watchers have advised caution in jumping to conclusions, reasoning that a new pope would never abruptly end a process that has been underway for several years. They suggest the Vatican has other ways to bring things to a salutary end.

Perhaps. But even in that instance, the women are left captive to the machinations of an all-male secret culture with its own rules that remain unknown to the rest of the world. The simple fact is that the women have never been able to talk with the pope directly. Why must they rely on Müller or Bráz de Aviz to convey their case?

In a few weeks, Francis will have another opportunity to show he intends to move beyond the status quo.

Nearly 600 members of the International Union of Superiors General, the international assembly of women religious leaders, will be in Rome for their triennial meeting May 3-7. If Francis wants to escape the stale air of the sacristy and breathe the healthy fresh air of the church in the streets, we can think of no better group to spend time with than these women. Last time the International Union of Superiors General met, Pope Benedict XVI did not see them. Francis should. It would be an overdue and encouraging sign of respect, a first step.

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