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The men of CDF and the women of LCWR by the numbers

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Don't you find it odd that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is issuing press statements about what it says Pope Francis said to congregation prefect Archbishop Gerhard Müller? I mean, can you find another example of a Curia head touting papal support? Doesn't Pope Francis seem to say what he wants to say without someone else saying it for him?

Here are the statistics:

On April 5, Müller's congregation issued a 139-word "communiqué" in Italian stating he had met with Pope Francis and discussed various issues "pertaining to CDF." The press release noted that the Holy Father particularly recommended the congregation carry on its work regarding priestly pederasty and sex abuse. No other topic was mentioned.

On April 15, Muller's congregation issued a 323-word communiqué in English reporting on its annual meeting with the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, also stating that Pope Francis has "reaffirmed" the findings of the doctrinal congregation's "assessment and the program of reform" of LCWR. Question: Had the pope "affirmed" what the doctrinal congregation says he then "reaffirmed"?

Lots of words about women, very few about the worldwide pederasty disaster. Going strictly by the numbers, it seems American women religious are 2.5 times more dangerous than priest pederasts. That is, the doctrinal congregation used about 2.5 times more words asserting its control over the workings of an ever-changing group of women whose lives are rooted in the Gospel. The dicastery talked a great deal less about its charge to handle clerical sex abuse problems.

The doctrinal congregation got its sashes in a knot over LCWR years ago. Then in April 2012, it famously published its negative findings of LCWR in an ambush maneuver that raised wrath among thinking people around the globe.

Toledo Bishop Leonard Blair and New York priest Charles Brown wrote the objectively flawed "assessment." Blair then joined Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain and Springfield, Ill., Bishop Thomas J. Paprocki on the takeover team. Brown, who was sent to Rome in 1991 to train as a seminary professor and never came back, is now an archbishop and apostolic nuncio to Ireland.

Right-wing bloggers still defend the doctrinal congregation's document and criticize LCWR assembly speeches given years ago as if the talks form current organizational policy.

Here's what folks don't seem to understand. First, LCWR is a membership organization of major superiors of women's institutes and orders established in the 1950s at the request of the Vatican. Second, because women's institutes and orders generally do not elect major superiors of life, but rather for fixed terms, the membership of LCWR (now about 1,500 women, including superiors and their councils) is constantly changing. Third, LCWR has a president-elect, a president and a past-president. In any given year, there is a new woman in the presidency.

So the Vatican asked for the organization in the first place, and from year A to year B, from one-sixth to one-third of the membership and fully one third of the presidency has turned over.

Now consider the speeches. From year to year, assembly speakers have varied from respected theologians (St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, 2008; M. Shawn Copeland and Richard Gaillardetz, 2010) to downright odd theorists (Barbara Marx Hubbard, 2012). So what if a speaker here or there is slightly outside the box? These are gatherings of very impressive women. They are educated and experienced leaders and managers. You could throw a dart at the assembly attendance list and land on the name of a woman capable of running just about any major organization -- or diocese. They are not impressionable shrinking violets. If anything, they know how to think.

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Next, consider the issues and concerns presented mostly to their own membership by a staff of nine women: inaccessibility to basic human needs, problems of violence at every level, dangers of corporate-governmental collusion, uses of religion to justify oppression, environmental degradation. These are quite similar to the concerns of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, whose 318-person staff uses its \$180 million budget to present its points to the media, the Congress and the church at large.

The problem? LCWR, largely aided by the doctrinal congregation's media dust-up, is now better able to present its calls for reform than the USCCB. Sometimes LCWR does not appear to agree exactly with the USCCB's agenda, as with the recent U.S. health care debate. As Sr. Simone Campbell said on the CBS program "60 Minutes" not long ago, it appears that in that situation, the boys played the girls and the boys

lost.

That is how all this looks on the flat screen. The men in black who appear to be in positions of power and privilege are picking on the sisters, whose lives of poverty, chastity and obedience serve as countercultural witness to the Gospel. This situation is either yet another Vatican-created public relations disaster or a clever ruse to turn U.S. religious and their supporters against Pope Francis.

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