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For LCWR, the more the papacy changes, the more it stays the same

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

The more something changes, the more it stays the same. It's a cliché, yes, but it seems to be an increasingly apt one to apply to the situation between women religious and the Vatican.

For those watching the situation unfold since April 2012, when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith mandated that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) be reformed by three U.S. bishops, this week promised to offer some explanations about where the new pope stands on the issue. Pope Francis even met with members of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), a group of nearly 2,000 leaders of women religious throughout the world who have been meeting in Rome all week.

There have been high hopes for Pope Francis among those left spiritually bruised by the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI. Francis paid his own hotel bill after the conclave, took the bus with the rest of the bishops, refused to move into the papal apartment, claimed to want a "poor church," and celebrated Holy Thursday at a juvenile detention facility where he washed the feet of 10 men and two women.

But a month after his election, a fly got caught in the balm Francis was pouring over the church's body. LCWR leaders were informed in a meeting with the doctrinal congregation's lead cleric, Archbishop Gerhard Müller, that the new pope had reaffirmed the mandated reform of the their organization.

Many Catholics who support both the LCWR and the new pope were at a loss to understand the news. Some imagined Francis simply wasn't up to speed about the injustices behind the mandate. Speculation ran high that Müller hadn't even spoken to Francis about the issue in any depth and that, somehow, Müller was speaking on behalf of Francis without the new pope's approval.

There was hope this week that all this conjecture was accurate when Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Religious, told the sisters at the UISG meeting that the doctrinal congregation made its fateful decision without his knowledge and that it caused him "much pain."

Less than a day later after his stunning admission, Cardinal Braz de Aviz was apparently taken to the doctrinal congregation's woodshed. The Vatican quickly released a statement claiming that the media (namely, the report in *NCR*) had misinterpreted Braz de Aviz's words and that Braz de Aviz and Müller "reaffirmed their common commitment to the renewal of Religious Life, and particularly to the Doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR and the program of reform it requires, in accordance with the wishes of the Holy Father."

The statement made two realities clear. First, as has typically been the case throughout the church's history, the doctrinal congregation wields more power than any other congregation in the Curia. Second, Francis is more familiar with the saga between the doctrinal congregation and LCWR than some had hoped.

In a press conference the following day, Braz de Aviz claimed not to have seen this statement from the Vatican and affirmed *NCR*'s report as "precise." He said the only idea that got lost in translation was his explanation of authority.

Braz de Aviz went on to reassert what Pope Francis had said earlier in the day about authority and obedience during his speech to the UISG.

"Christ and the church. The two have to be together. For some people, Christ is fine, but the church isn't. You can't separate the two," the cardinal told the press.

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Braz de Aviz was echoing Francis' statement to women religious: "It is an absurd dichotomy to think of living with Jesus but without the church, of following Jesus outside of the church, of loving Jesus without loving the church."

Francis has offered this idea more than once over the last few weeks, but when directed at women religious, as it was on Wednesday, it takes on a particular weight.

At the UISG meeting the previous day, Congregation of Jesus Sr. Martha Zechmeister, an Austrian professor of systematic theology, told the gathering of 800 women superiors, "Religious obedience ultimately can only respond to God's authority. In the traditional language, fulfilling the will of God is the only legitimate reason for religious obedience."

It is a sentiment we've heard often since the doctrinal congregation's crackdown on LCWR, and one for which the new pope apparently has little sympathy. Francis makes it clear that it is impossible to follow Jesus and not follow the church. In Francis' eyes, it seems, to love and obey God is to love and obey the church.

Though Francis was the first pope to meet with the UISG, those who expected a dialogue with the new pontiff were likely disappointed. Francis offered a 15-minute reflection on religious life, then shook hands and exchanged brief pleasantries with the UISG's executive board and staff.

As *NCR*'s Joshua J. McElwee reported from Rome, Francis' speech "focused on three themes, telling the sister leaders to keep their lives centered on Christ, to think of authority in terms of service, and that they must hold a 'feeling with the church that finds its filial expression in fidelity to the magisterium.' "

In other words, the way to be a true daughter of the church is to be faithful and obedient to the teachings of the pope and bishops.

With ideas that are no different from those of Pope John Paul II and Benedict, Francis told the sisters they should accept a "fertile chastity" because women religious are "mothers" who "generate spiritual children in the church."

The new pope maintained his and his predecessors' belief in the "special" (but not equal) role of women in the church, telling the sisters that without them, the church "would be missing maternity, affection, tenderness." He went on to tell them to put themselves "in an attitude of adoration and service."

If there is a point on which both Francis and the sisters agree, it is the importance of "touching the flesh of the poor Christ in the humble, the poor, the sick, and in children."

But Francis does not seem to understand that it is precisely because women religious regularly touch that wounded body of Christ that they have such rich theological imaginations and a longing to delve into the spiritual questions of our time. Their intensely sacramental lives of service help clarify their priorities in their pursuits of justice and mercy.

All that women religious have done -- the work they have committed to, the leadership style they have developed and the theologians they invite to their meetings -- has been inspired by their ministry to the broken body of Christ. What Francis and the doctrinal congregation may interpret as a "deviation from doctrine" or a "failure to obey" are really just the fruits of women religious fulfilling their vocation as a prophetic life form.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that the Vatican is punishing women religious for failing to strictly adhere to doctrines that they have had no voice in developing and no role in shaping -- precisely because they are women.

The look and feel of the papacy may be changing under Francis, but the fundamental understanding magisterium's authority and the requirement that the women obey the men, I'm afraid, will continue to stay the same.

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