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Key US sister: Vatican's LCWR order 'unacceptable'

by Joshua J. McElwee

A year and a half after the Vatican ordered the main representative group of U.S. Catholic sisters to place itself under the control of three U.S. bishops, many sister-leaders still consider complete compliance with the order "unacceptable," the head of the largest order of sisters in the Western Hemisphere said Thursday.

Many members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) do not think they can give complete control of their group over to the bishops, Mercy Sr. Pat McDermott told *NCR* Aug. 1.

"The points of direction for the future, I think are unacceptable -- that the bishops would be looking at our materials, our publications, giving direction to the assembly," said McDermott, who as president of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas leads about 4,000 sisters serving in the U.S. and 11 other countries.

"That's not a conference that most leaders want to belong to."

McDermott's comments come as LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of the 57,000 U.S. sisters, is preparing for its annual assembly, to be held this year from Aug. 13-16 in Orlando, Fla. About 900 women religious are expected to attend.

Addressing them will be Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain. A year and a half ago, the Vatican appointed Sartain as "archbishop delegate" of LCWR, giving him wide-ranging control over the conference's statutes and programs.

Leaders of LCWR and the individual institutes of U.S. sisters have expressed pain and confusion over the Vatican's move, made in a "doctrinal assessment" published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

While some sister leaders initially expressed hope Pope Francis might take a softer line on the situation than Pope Benedict XVI, a statement from the doctrinal congregation in April said Francis "reaffirmed the findings of the Assessment and the program of reform."

In her interview, McDermott said she and other sister leaders are looking for a "third way" to deal with the Vatican's move. She also said they are hoping the pope will consider meeting personally with LCWR's leaders to hear the concerns over the matter, similar to his meeting with members of the Latin American Conference of Religious (CLAR) in June.

"I think that's a fair expectation on our part," said McDermott.

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McDermott also mentioned conversations she has had with global leaders of sisters on the LCWR matter stemming from her attendance in Rome in May of the assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), a membership organization of some 1,800 leaders of congregations of women religious world-wide.

Following is *NCR's* conversation with McDermott, with minor editing for length.

NCR: Where do things sit at this moment for women religious and LCWR? What are you thinking as you go into the assembly this year?

McDermott: LCWR has been doing some meetings this summer. I was at a regional meeting just last week in the Baltimore area. I think it's a lot of conversation to try to sort out where members are in general. I think what I heard pretty strongly is that people want to bring this to closure. But how to do that with the integrity that LCWR holds -- that's the ongoing challenge still.

The mandate has taken an enormous amount of energy -- certainly from the presidents and from the leadership at the office in Silver Spring. And I think people question how we can maintain that constant kind of attention to this.

I think there's a way in which I hope that we can put it in its rightful position. I don't think it will be resolved at this assembly. I think we can continue to give direction to the leaders that the principles that we want -- honest and open dialogue, mutual accountability, faithfulness to our mission -- we want those upheld. So how can you do that and bring the doctrinal assessment to a close?

I think one of the opportunities of this assembly is to engage Archbishop Sartain. That's a key factor. And I think however he presents himself -- and especially however he presents what he has learned this year in engaging with LCWR leaders -- that will be key. I'm very interested in hearing him and hearing what he has learned. What is his perception of LCWR at this time? How does he see our fidelity to our mission?

I know it's a five-year process, but it cannot be five years of this kind of intense energy. I don't think that's in service of our mission.

Coming out of that meeting in Baltimore, you felt there was a need to somehow bring this to an end -- even though it's a five year mandate to somehow say, "We need to close this."

That was certainly a strong common sentiment in the leaders that were present there. But it's never just bring it to closure, but bring it to closure with integrity. And I think one of the unknowns in this is Pope Francis. Will he be a person that will welcome dialogue? Would he be willing to sit down with the LCWR leaders?

I think that's a fair expectation on our part that he would. He did it with CLAR earlier this summer. And it seems reasonable and I think it would be a positive step, not only for LCWR and women religious but for our church, were he to sit with us and just listen to the experience of the doctrinal assessment and what that has been for us. And why it still remains a document that's not faithful to our experience.

You said you want to know how Archbishop Sartain sees LCWR. Among your sisters or LCWR leaders you speak to, what do you want him to know about you? How do you want that time to unfold with him?

Well, certainly, I hope it's a mutual time. Where he presents his observations, his learning, from this year of -- I assume -- intense conversation with the LCWR leaders. I assume also that he would receive from us our observations on how we have tried to be faithful to religious life. How we lived out the spirit of the Gospel and certainly the principles of Vatican II. How we have tried to renew religious life in light of what our church asked of us out of Vatican II.

I think he would get a very consistent message from us, if that's part of the dialogue: That we have been faithful, that we have tried, in light of what our church asked us in Vatican II, to renew ourselves.

And to be faithful not only to church doctrines and church principles, but faithful to our own experience about what we've learned about religious life, about what we've learned about the needs of the world. And that we're engaging those needs of the world out of the perspective of being women of the church -- faithful to the Gospel, faithful to the church.

I can't imagine that the congregational leaders at LCWR would say anything other than that. Of trying to just explain and to kind of enhance for him what our experience has been like. And that it has been an experience of fidelity; it has been an experience of richness of our partnership with church leaders, with our lay brothers and sisters.

It's been a very rich journey of renewal in which we have found ourselves more lively, more vibrant, more attentive to the Gospel, more engaged with people's needs and the needs of the world, more in partnership with our church.

That is our story. And it's been a wonderful story. And I think the congregational leaders are people that love religious life. And they love the mission that they're blessed with, and they love the privilege and the opportunity to lead that mission with fidelity.

I just hope it can be that kind of engaging moment where he comes with his learning, but he also receives from us the energy and the commitment that we have.

Have you been told whether he will take questions or how that might work?

I don't know that. I think it's a time of both his presenting as well as engagement.

I know that the LCWR presidents met with the three U.S. bishops after the last assembly. Have you heard anything about when the last time they met was, or how that's been going?

We received an update, but it was a verbal update and it was fairly general. But the tones were very positive. I can't speak to particulars, but the tone of the engagement of the presidency with Archbishop Sartain and the bishops -- it seems like this last meeting was a very positive experience. What that means, I don't really know.

You said that one thing that kept coming up is how or whether LCWR can continue to devote energy to this.

The kind of energy, I think. It's a major agenda for us. And it's important and we need to stay with it until hopefully the resolution will be a positive one, mutually for our church as well as for ourselves. And it will be one that is marked by the characteristics of honest and open conversation and a sense of mutuality.

But I do think it's a heavy burden for the presidency. It's a heavy burden for the conference. And we still live in the shadow that it was an inaccurate doctrinal assessment. It did not tell the whole truth. So the points of disagreement, to my knowledge, have not been addressed definitively. And that would need to happen.

And the points of direction for the future, I think are unacceptable -- that the bishops would be looking at our materials, our publications, giving direction to the assembly. That's not a conference that most leaders want to belong to.

The leaders of LCWR have been faithful. They've really worked with the church, they've updated CDF and the different dicasteries in Rome, annually. It's not that the communications have not been there, but the judgments are not there. And the results of those judgments are not the kinds of practices that the doctrinal assessment speaks to. They're not reasonable.

So somewhere in there, I think the hope is that there's a middle way in which Archbishop Sartain, with our presidents and [Sister of St. Joseph] Janet Mock [LCWR executive director], will find a way that does have integrity -- certainly for our church, but mostly for LCWR.

But you find the current predicament of having bishops reviewing and overseeing unacceptable?

Yes.

Is that something that many sisters are still saying?

Oh, absolutely. That's not a path that we think is our future.

So then is the question how to respond to that or how to work out some kind of compromise?

I don't know if it will be a compromise. I assume that Archbishop Sartain and the other bishops, in their continued conversation with the LCWR leaders and with us at the assembly -- that they may come to a new understanding of the doctrinal assessment itself. I hold open that possibility because if that doesn't happen, I don't know what the engagement for the future can be.

I think there is always a third way and that way is not known yet, but I think it's a way that mutually can

be satisfactory. And it could be helped if Pope Francis were willing to sit down with the LCWR leadership and listen to the concerns and inaccuracies that were made in the doctrinal assessment.

That story needs to be told and the leadership of our church needs to receive it. Whether they'll agree with it, I don't know. But they need to receive it. And I don't know if in the engagement with Archbishop Sartain that story has been told and received.

That was something another sister I spoke to said. The first thing that needs to be said at the assembly during the time with Archbishop Sartain -- before anyone gets to deeper issues -- is that the assessment is incorrect and that the sisters must ask the archbishop to explain what happened, or how the investigators came to their conclusions.

That's absolutely true. That's not just a stumbling block, that's something that absolutely has to happen. We need to hear from Archbishop Sartain how he sees that. I don't know if the conversations during this past year have been significant enough where he has had the opportunity to walk through the doctrinal assessment with the leaders and for them to present why those inaccuracies are so upsetting to us.

You were at the global meeting of sisters with the UISG this year. From that perspective of meeting with those sisters from around the world, what are you bringing to LCWR? How do you see this in a global perspective now?

I think it said to me that congregational leaders across our globe are being stretched with some of the same issues. And we want to be a resource to one another but I don't think we have the right venues. It's a daunting task to find out how that can happen.

But many of our congregations are international and so they're finding ways to share the LCWR story across the world. Certainly, [Franciscan Sr.] Pat Farrell and [Franciscan Sr.] Florence Deacon [respectively the past and current presidents of LCWR] had numerous opportunities this past summer to visit other countries and, I think, found a welcome space.

Not so much about the LCWR story, but about the same journey of renewal since Vatican II. Many of us as women religious, men religious, priests, and our lay brothers and sisters -- we took on that journey together and it's taken us to new understandings and new ways of being church.

I think that's the point of intersection for LCWR with global women religious leaders. It's that new sense of identity as church. Where are the pockets of hope and the pockets of frustration about that? And how do we help each other?

When you were talking in Rome with other leaders or in your own order, have people expressed a fear about what this means for women globally?

I wouldn't call it a fear. I think there is a concern. There's a concern that as a church we're not doing well with dialogue.

One of the principles we came out with at last year's LCWR assembly was that we would hold conversations among ourselves that would be reflective of the kinds of conversations that our whole church would have -- that we could address moral, ethical, theological issues in honest dialogue with one another in a way that our whole church would.

In the end, for me, it's not so much about whether doctrine will change -- and perhaps it will. But it's about attitudes.

It's about: Can we have conversations with one another that are rich and stretching about what's happening in our world? In the end, that's what religious life is about. It's attending to the needs of our world.

How do we do that with integrity? How do we do that with new understandings of how the Gospel message can be present to the most serious needs of our world? That's the bottom line.

Our church is a venue for that; religious life is a venue for that. That's the heart of the mission that we're about: How do we engage the needs of the world? How will our relationship with the church assist us with that?

And where will the stumbling blocks be? How will we negotiate those through mutuality and good conversation?

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