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LCWR: The coming assembly

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The website of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) offers this headline: "We welcome new members and new ideas for living religious life into the future." And this year, some of those new ideas might come from the keynote speaker at the annual LCWR assembly in Orlando, Fla.: Franciscan Sr. Iliia Delio, who directs the Catholic Studies Program at Georgetown University. She is one of the emerging thinkers emphasizing the "new cosmos story" and, in this case, its relevance for contemporary religious life.

But hanging over the entire assembly is the Vatican "mandate" that made headlines last year. LCWR leaders and many others offered stinging critiques of the mandate's thrust and inaccuracies. Thousands of Catholics took to the streets and cathedral steps to voice their protest.

Now, Sr. Patricia McDermott, president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, a large community in LCWR, said in an interview that "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." I'm sure she speaks for far more LCWR members than just herself.

Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle, head of the three-bishop committee that is supposed to carry out the mandate, will speak at the assembly and reportedly will take questions from the assembled sisters. It will be interesting to see if he has heard any of those messages and if he understands the thrust of religious life today.

In fact, Sartain should be familiar with Catholics who operate out of conscience. According to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* on Aug. 5: "He has found that Catholics, and parishes, in Western Washington

are an independent-minded, conscience-driven lot. Several parishes in Seattle and Tacoma refused to serve as gathering points for the signature campaign to roll back marriage equality in Washington. A big demonstration of pro-gay marriage Catholics took place outside St. James Cathedral a week before election day."

It will also be interesting to try to decipher whether Pope Francis has any influence on this process. Early reports said he approved the mandate, but those reports came from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which inaugurated the mandate, not the pope himself.

One of the accusations against LCWR in the mandate was its emphasis on social justice rather than issues of sexuality or abortion. Funny thing: One might say the same thing about Pope Francis.

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