

Eyes on a man - a prelate - at a women's assembly

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 13, 2013 NCR Today
Orlando, Fla.

Leadership Conference of Women Religious members have begun to check in. Some 850 will be here.

Again, as a year ago, this LCWR assembly faces an very uncertain conclusion, and, one man, a prelate, [Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain](#), [1] appointed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to oversee LCWR, will largely determine the outcome.

To more than a few here this seems to be a major blunder, a huge waste of time and energy, and a distraction from the Gospel-focused mission of women religious congregations. It also seems to be an episode in a church anachronistically crippled in sexism.

A quick pulse of the women here, however, reveals not anger, but a curious sense of cautious hope, a belief the Spirit, in the end, will have her way.

Sartain is expected to speak for some 30 minutes Thursday afternoon in a room closed to outsiders. His talk will be followed by 45 minutes of responses from the audience. Sartain is attending the entire LCWR assembly, but, according to at least one planner, will not be in other closed sessions. Despite his CDF mandate, he appears to be more guest here than manager. He was not involved in the planning of the gathering, an enterprise still entirely under LCWR control, a source told NCR.

The format of the exchange between Sartain and the women is loose. It is uncertain if Sartain will respond to individual comments, to clusters of comments, or will refrain from responding at all.

Women religious with knowledge of assembly preparations say they are hopeful the exchanges will be fruitful and constructive, but to this point Sartain has not revealed his hand.

Sartain arrived at the LCWR chosen hotel Caribe Royal, a Saint Peter's Square distance away from Disneyworld, last night. He has been spotted talking to a few women, but has largely kept out of sight today.

During the past year, since the close of the LCWR assembly in Saint Louis, during which members voted to continue dialogue with the CDF, but only while maintaining their own integrity, exchanges between Sartain and LCWR have been sporadic. They have focused on educating the prelate on religious life, says one insider.

The initiators of the doctrinal investigation, which led to the CDF decision to take control of the allegedly unfaithful conference of women, have long since left the scene, leaving it to others to execute the program.

The whole investigation, findings and mandate now have the feeling of a bad hangover, with people wondering how the whole episode ever happened, what it still might be about, and with women once again being called upon to figure out a way to clean up after a gathering of errant men.

The hope here is that Sartain will find a way to call for an end to the CDF five-year LCWR oversight mandate.

Enough is enough. The fear is church structures and authority will be seen at stake, and the process, even as it loses steam, will simply lumber on.

Of course, Pope Francis could end the pain with a single stroke. And so this gathering, too, is a measure and test of the Francis pontificate, now five months old.

Will Sartain carry a Franciscan message of reconciliation?

Will the urgency to get on with church work ?at the peripheries,? which Francis has repeatedly said is the core work of the church ? and has been the undying and faithful mission of the women religious for decades ? outweigh a CDF judgment, which seems murkier, more distant, and less critical by the day?

Will Sartain have come to understand there is no separation of LCWR and the women religious communities of America? Indeed, that LCWR is a collective voice of educated and dedicated women religious not only in the US, but also in many other parts of the world.

So we enter another LCWR assembly and another chapter of a hapless story. It is hot and humid here on a clear Florida day. There seems to be little sense of combativeness among the women. If anything, there is more of a sense of futility and fatigue regarding the CDF initiative.

The unnerving reality, however, is that one man has the ability to determine the direction and outcome of an assembly of hundreds of women.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-appointed-overseer-attend-lcwr-gathering>