

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 19, 2013 at 10:28am

LCWR: 'Profound sharing' with Sartain, 'uncertain' of progress

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NCR Today
LCWR 2013

The leadership of the main group representing U.S. Catholic sisters met this weekend with the archbishop appointed by the Vatican to oversee them and they had a "profound and honest sharing of views," the group said in a statement Monday.

Representatives of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) were meeting with Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, who was appointed by the Vatican in April 2012 as the group's "archbishop delegate" and given wide authority to revise its statutes and programs,

The prelate and the sisters met following LCWR's annual assembly, which was held in Orlando, Fla., Aug. 13-16 and saw some 825 sisters, representatives of the country's Catholic orders of sisters, attend. Sartain also attended the gathering and held a closed door, 90-minute meeting with the LCWR members Aug. 15.

While that closed-door meeting provided Sartain "little opportunity" to answer LCWR members' questions, LCWR says in its Monday statement, the archbishop "had been listening intently and heard the concerns voiced by the members, and their desire for more information."

"The extraordinarily rich and deeply reverent conversation during the board meeting gave us a greater understanding of Archbishop Sartain, and we believe he now also better understands us," the statement continues.

"Although we remain uncertain as to how our work with the bishop delegates will proceed, we maintain

hope that continued conversations of this depth will lead to a resolution of this situation that maintains the integrity of LCWR and is healthy for the whole church.?

LCWR, which was first founded at the Vatican's request in 1956, represents about 80 percent of the some 57,000 U.S. sisters.

Its members and leaders have long expressed pain and confusion over the Vatican's move against their group, made in a "doctrinal assessment" published by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that gave Sartain a mandate of "up to five years, as deemed necessary? to revise the group.

Meetings between Sartain and LCWR leaders in the 18 months since publishing of the mandate have taken place outside public scrutiny, and neither Sartain nor the sisters have publicly detailed the number or content of their meetings.

The 90-minute meeting Aug. 15 was held under lock and key, with uniformed guards placed near the doors of the meeting room to prevent unauthorized entry. LCWR members were asked by the group's leaders not to discuss the meeting with members of the press.

Speaking to *NCR* following that meeting, several LCWR members said Sartain then had little to offer regarding the reason for Vatican concern or how the process goes forward.

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One member said Sartain did not respond in any detailed way to questions about the specific allegations made in the Vatican doctrinal assessment of LCWR, preferring instead to talk about his general sense of the role of religious life in the church.

While Sartain and LCWR leaders have said during the assembly they would not be talking to press during the assembly about their relationship, the archbishop had at least one meal with the sisters' group's board and was seen speaking in a friendly manner with a number of sisters over the week.

The archbishop also addressed the group briefly in public Aug. 13 at the assembly's opening, saying that he and the LCWR leaders "have developed a wonderful respect for one another."

"I am here this week with you yes as the apostolic delegate ?and as the representative of Pope Francis,? Sartain continued then. ?But I am also here as your brother and friend.?"

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