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Head of Vatican doctrinal congregation confronts LCWR for noncooperation

by Dennis Coday

LCWR-CDF 2014

The Vatican chief of doctrine has accused U.S. women religious leaders of not abiding by a reform agenda the Vatican imposed on their leadership organization following a doctrinal assessment of the group.

Cardinal Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, told the leadership group they were ignoring procedures for choosing speakers for their annual conferences and questioned if their programs were promoting heresy.

Using the most direct and confrontational language since the Vatican began to rein in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious two years ago, Müller told leaders of the conference that starting in August, they must have their annual conference programs approved by a Vatican-appointed overseer before the conference agendas and speakers are finalized.

Müller also told the women religious that their choice of conference speakers and the printed material they make available to their membership cause him to question if LCWR has "the ability truly to *sentire cum Ecclesia* (feel with the church)."

"This concern is even deeper than the Doctrinal Assessment's criticism of the LCWR for not providing a counter-point during presentations and Assemblies when speakers diverge from Church teaching," Müller said. "The Assessment is concerned with positive errors of doctrine seen in the light of the LCWR's responsibility to support a vision of religious life in harmony with that of the Church and to promote a solid doctrinal basis for religious life."

A copy of Müller's address to the LCWR leadership has been posted to the Vatican website. It is dated April 30, when the leadership team was in Rome for its annual visit to the Vatican.

The April 30 meeting at the Vatican included the LCWR leadership -- St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn, Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sharon Holland, and St. Joseph Sr. Janet Mock, LCWR executive director -- Müller and officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the Vatican-appointed delegate to LCWR.

A statement Monday from LCWR said that Müller's remarks "accurately reflect the content of the mandate communicated to LCWR in April 2012. As articulated in the Cardinal's statement, these remarks were meant to set a context for the discussion that followed."

The discussion that followed, the LCWR statement said, "was an experience of dialogue that was respectful and engaging."

The spokeswoman for LWCR told *NCR* Monday that the organization would not be granting interviews.

Müller specifically challenged the LCWR leaders for deciding to bestow its 2014 Outstanding Leadership Award to "a theologian criticized by the Bishops of the United States because of the gravity of the doctrinal errors in that theologian's writings." Although he does not name her, Müller is referencing St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, a theologian at Fordham University.

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"This is a decision that will be seen as a rather open provocation against the Holy See and the Doctrinal Assessment," Müller said. "Not only that, but it further alienates the LCWR from the Bishops as well."

His harshest criticism, however, was reserved for the LCWR's promotion at its assemblies and printed resources of conscious evolution, which Müller compared to gnosticism, a term that describes various sects that arose in the second century that exalted arcane knowledge, mixing Christian belief with pagan speculation and theories. "Gnosis" is the Greek word for knowledge.

"We have seen again and again in the history of the Church the tragic results of partaking of this bitter fruit," Müller said. "Conscious Evolution does not offer anything which will nourish religious life as a privileged and prophetic witness rooted in Christ revealing divine love to a wounded world."

Two years ago, a keynote speaker at LCWR's annual conference was a leading thinker on conscious evolution, Barbara Marx Hubbard. Since that address, Müller said, "every issue of your newsletter has discussed Conscious Evolution in some way. Issues of Occasional Papers have been devoted to it. We have even seen some religious Institutes modify their directional statements to incorporate concepts and undeveloped terms from Conscious Evolution."

"Again, I apologize if this seems blunt, but what I must say is too important to dress up in flowery language," Müller said in one of several apologies for blunt language. "The fundamental theses of Conscious Evolution are opposed to Christian Revelation."

In April 2012, the Vatican appointed Sartain as the LCWR's "archbishop delegate" and gave him authority to revise its statutes and programs. In Müller's statement, he said this appointment has been criticized as "as heavy-handed interference in the day-to-day activities of the Conference. For its part, the

Holy See would not understand this as a 'sanction,' but rather as a point of dialogue and discernment."

That LCWR did not discuss with Sartain the outstanding leadership honoree this year "is indeed regrettable and demonstrates clearly the necessity of the Mandate's provision that speakers and presenters at major programs will be subject to approval by the Delegate.

"I must therefore inform you that this provision is to be considered fully in force. ... Following the August Assembly, it will be the expectation of the Holy See that Archbishop Sartain have an active role in the discussion about invited speakers and honorees," Müller said.

Müller concluded with this warning: "At this phase of the implementation of the Doctrinal Assessment, we are looking for a clearer expression of that ecclesial vision and more substantive signs of collaboration."

Read Müller's statement: Meeting of the Superiors of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the Presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious

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