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Coalition calls for papal apology to U.S. sisters

by Brian Roewe

NCR Today
LCWR CDF 2014

An open letter to the pope has asked for an apology to U.S. women religious and an intervention on their behalf in their ongoing reform discussions with the Vatican's doctrinal congregation.

It was with "respect and gratitude" but also "concern and dismay" that The Nun Justice Project, a coalition of 16 progressive U.S. Catholic organizations, wrote Pope Francis Thursday regarding recent comments from Cardinal Gerhard Müller to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The organization, representing more than 90 percent of U.S. congregations of Catholic women religious, is currently under a reform mandate from the Müller-headed Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In opening marks April 30 ahead of a meeting in Rome between LCWR and the doctrinal congregation, Müller criticized the organization's focus on conscious evolution and the process it used in selecting speakers and presenters.

That included its decision to award at its upcoming August conference Fordham University theologian St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson with its Outstanding Leadership Award, given that U.S. bishops have criticized her writings for doctrinal errors. As a result Müller put in full force a provision of the reform mandate requiring speakers and presenters at major programs be approved by Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the Vatican delegate.

LCWR responded May 8, saying "mistrust has developed" but that discussions with the doctrinal congregation will continue.

The coalition in its letter asked for Francis to intervene and remove the mandates on LCWR.

"Cardinal Müller's preemptive public criticism of LCWR leadership and Dr. Johnson, one of the most beloved and respected theologians in the world, eclipsed any opportunity for public dialogue," it stated. "This communicates that faithful Catholic female leaders are disrespected and discounted in our Church."

The coalition suggested the situation with LCWR presented Francis an opportunity to act on his calls for expanding leadership roles for women, "that the place to begin is to listen to faithful women who are already exercising leadership.

The letter asked for a public apology to Johnson and LCWR leadership, saying it "would speak volumes about the institutional Church's intent to truly listen to women and honor their voices."

In addition to the letter, the coalition has asked supporters to sign an online petition. As of Thursday afternoon, more than 800 people had signed. The Nun Justice Project also urged people to Tweet "We

stand with the Sisters" to the pope, as well as mail him copies of their letter and Spanish copies Johnson's books *Consider Jesus* and *Quest for the Living God*.

The coalition includes the American Catholic Council; Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests; Call To Action; DignityUSA; FutureChurch; National Coalition of American Nuns; New Ways Ministry; Voice of the Faithful; and Women's Ordination Conference.

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The full Nun Justice Project letter is as follows:

Dear Pope Francis

We write with respect and gratitude for your extraordinary leadership in our Church.

Sadly, we also write with concern and dismay at the behavior that Cardinal Gerhard Müller recently exhibited toward women leaders of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and especially toward Dr. Elizabeth Johnson CSJ.

Cardinal Müller's preemptive public criticism of LCWR leadership and Dr. Johnson, one of the most beloved and respected theologians in the world, eclipsed any opportunity for public dialogue.

This communicates that faithful Catholic female leaders are disrespected and discounted in our Church.

On numerous occasions you have expressed a desire to expand leadership opportunities for women. We respectfully suggest that the place to begin is to listen to faithful women who are already exercising leadership.

We ask you to personally intervene with Cardinal Müller and Archbishop Sartain and remove the unjust mandates imposed on LCWR over two years ago.

In addition, a public apology to Dr. Johnson and LCWR leadership would speak volumes about the institutional Church's intent to truly listen to women and honor their voices.

In closing, we express our love and solidarity with you as together we joyfully proclaim the rich diversity revealed in the Good News of Jesus Christ, a message ever ancient yet ever new.

Sincerely yours,

The Nun Justice Project
American Catholic Council
Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests
Catholics Speak Out / Quixote Center
Call To Action
CORPUS
DignityUSA
Federation of Christian Ministries/RCFCC
FutureChurch
National Coalition of American Nuns
New Ways Ministry

Pax Christi Maine
RAPPORT
Roman Catholic Womenpriests - USA
Southeastern Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference
Voice of the Faithful
Women's Ordination Conference

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* staff writer. Follow him on Twitter: [@BrianRoewe](#).]

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