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Vatican investigates U.S. women religious leadership

Thomas C. Fox | Apr. 14, 2009

The Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has initiated a doctrinal investigation of the largest U.S. women?s religious leadership organization, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The Vatican already announced a **separate study** [1] last December to assess the ?quality of life? in apostolic women?s religious communities throughout the United States.

The Vatican congregation informed the leadership conference officers of its new ?doctrinal assessment? in a February 20 letter, which the officers received March 10. The letter came from Cardinal William Joseph Levada, the congregation?s prefect.

In his letter, Levada explained the congregation is undertaking its ?assessment? of the women?s leadership conference after initial Vatican doctrinal concerns were expressed in 2001.

Levada, the former archbishop of San Francisco, was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to head the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2005.

Officers at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious [3] sent a letter to conference members April 2 telling them of the investigation. NCR obtained a copy of that letter.

The conference is an association of the leaders of congregations of Catholic women religious in the United States. It has more than 1,500 members, who represent about 95 percent of the 68,000 U.S. women religious.

Asked by NCR to respond to the Vatican initiative, the leadership conference issued a brief statement.

?The Leadership Conference of Women Religious received on March 10 a letter dated February 20, 2009 from Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The letter announces CDF?s decision to conduct a doctrinal assessment of LCWR?s activities and initiatives.

?At this time, LCWR knows neither the process nor timeline for completion of this assessment. As more information is made available to LCWR, the conference will take the appropriate steps to prepare for its participation in the assessment. LCWR faces this process with confidence, believing that the conference has remained faithful to its mission of service to leaders of congregations of women religious as they seek to further the mission of Christ in today?s world.?

The Vatican assessment has become necessary, according to Levada, because at the 2001 meeting between the women?s leadership conference and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which took place in Rome, the women were invited ?to report on the initiatives taken or planned? to promote the reception of three areas of Vatican doctrinal concern: the 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, the 2000 declaration *Dominus Jesus* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and ?the problem of homosexuality.?

Ordinatio sacerdotalis, [4] Latin for ?On the Ordination to the Priesthood,? was a Vatican document that reasserted that Catholic ordination to the priesthood is reserved for men alone and that the church ?has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women.?

Dominus Jesus [5] was a declaration that, in part, insisted that non-Catholic Christians are ?in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the church, have the fullness of the means of salvation? and that non-Catholic Christian communities suffer ?defects.? It was viewed at the time by some Catholic theologians and leaders of other religions as a major setback in interreligious dialogue.

In a 1986 **letter written by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger**, [6]now Pope Benedict, to the world?s bishops, he wrote: ?Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.?

Regarding the investigation of the women?s leadership conference, Levada informed conference leaders: ?Given both the tenor and the doctrinal content of various addresses given at the annual assemblies of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the intervening years, this Dicastery can only conclude that the problems which had motivated its request in 2001 continue to be present.?

As a result, Levada said, the Vatican had decided ?a doctrinal assessment? of the ?activities and initiatives of the LCWR would be helpful.?

Levada added that the decision was reached while in communication with Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

Under Rodé?s leadership, his congregation last December announced it had begun its own investigation of U.S. women?s religious communities with the expressed aim of assessing the ?quality of life? among their members and to determine why numbers of women religious have fallen in recent decades.

The Rodé study is being conducted under the direction of the superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mother Clare Millea, whom Rodé appointed as apostolic visitator.

The new assessment of the women?s leadership conference, Levada stated in his letter, will be conducted by Leonard P. Blair, bishop of Toledo, Ohio, a member of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops? Committee on Doctrine.

Levada said Blair?s principal purpose is to ?review the work of the LCWR in supporting its membership as communities of faith and witness to Christ in today?s church, and to offer any useful assistance.?

Officers at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious told their members that Blair had contacted them and they plan to meet later this spring. They also told members that they had asked for an appointment with Levada before the Vatican announcement that their conference was being investigated. The meeting with Levada is set for April 22.

The April 2 letter from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious was signed by conference president J. Lora Dambroski, Sister of Saint Francis of the Providence of God; executive director Jane Burke, Sister of Notre Dame; Mary Whited, Sister of the Most Precious Blood and past president of the leadership conference; and president-elect Marlene Weisenbeck, Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration.

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