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'The mood has been changing'

by Thomas C. Fox

Hours before she stepped down as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious on the last day of its Aug. 10-13 gathering in Dallas, I sat down with Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Marlene Weisenbeck to talk to her about her tumultuous year as head of the Leadership Conference. What follows is a slightly edited, for space, version of that conversation.

NCR: You met with Fr. [Joseph] Tobin recently. How did that meeting go? [Tobin, an American Redemptorist, was appointed secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life Aug. 2, a move seen by many as a positive sign to U.S. women religious, under the dark cloud of a Vatican apostolic visitation.]

Weisenbeck: I met with him in Los Angeles at the [Conference of Major Superiors of Men] meeting. He was there. He had planned to be there, I think, before his appointment and we didn't have any knowledge that he'd be there until we heard about it in the press.

Did the LCWR leadership meet with him?

Yes, [Executive Director] Jane [Burke] and I met with Fr. Tobin.

Do you think that the appointment was meant to send a signal to LCWR?

It's extremely difficult to tell what the Vatican intended. It was good news for us. We felt very encouraged by it. Our visits with him felt like a brother and sisters meeting together. He's a person who's comfortable with himself and who has a lot of knowledge of Vatican personalities and processes. He's not naive. He knows the difficulties of church politics as much as he knows about the beauty of the church and its universality and its diversity.

In his public remarks he seems to want to make something positive out of the apostolic visitation. Did he elaborate?

He didn't give us any details. He was trying to confirm what he already knew, and to glean any other further insights that we might be able to give to him.

Did you see this as a sign of hope?

I'm hearing from many sisters that it's a hopeful sign.

How would you characterize the apostolic visits that have already taken place in local religious communities?

I am hearing positive reactions. I'm hearing women say they have learned something about themselves through the experience, that the sisters have found their voice in this process.

I've also heard that if there was one thing the women would want to make this a more positive experience it would be to be able to see the reports and to comment on the final report.

That's a correct interpretation.

You've asked to be able to do this.

It's been an ongoing request. ... I'm hearing now from sisters that they want to document the visits themselves, their experiences of those visits, and there is some talk about perhaps doing this on a broader level in the country or regionally or by charism groups so these become documented pieces of their own community histories and also the history of religious life here in the United States.

At the same time there's been so much energy put into the whole idea of the apostolic visitation that people are saying, "How much more time can we take away from mission in order to just write our history?" But I think it will happen.

What are the most important lessons that you've learned in this last year as LCWR president?

One of the things we've learned is the importance of effective and good relationships, first of all, among ourselves, and on the broader levels with our church, our bishops and among religious congregations.

We now have a little history with the apostolic visitation and with our relationships with the Vatican over the doctrinal assessment and we've responded with our best integrity and authenticity. As you do that, I think you grow in confidence about your ability to relate well in all of these situations.

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Do you think that you'll be able to look back one day and see the apostolic visitation and the Vatican LCWR doctrinal inquiry as positive things?

You know, I think we're quite a ways along the road to that being true already. There was anger at first, but as people are having better experiences with the visits, the mood has been changing.

Are there more talks scheduled now with the Vatican on either the doctrinal study or apostolic visitation?

No. I think the next scheduled Vatican meeting is next May at our annual visit to the Vatican dicasteries.

Have there been any threats to LCWR made by Rome?

I wouldn't say that there's been an overt threat. I think the fact that there is a visitation or an inquiry is, in itself, threatening; it has a threatening quality to it.

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