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LCWR 'stunned' by Vatican's latest move

by Joshua J. McElwee



The largest leadership organization for U.S. women religious says it was "stunned" by the announcement Wednesday that the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had ordered it to reform its statutes and had appointed an archbishop to oversee its revision.

"The presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious was stunned by the conclusions of the doctrinal assessment of LCWR by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith," the group said in a news release Thursday morning.

"Because the leadership of LCWR has the custom of meeting annually with the staff of CDF in Rome and because the conference follows canonically-approved statutes, we were taken by surprise."

On Wednesday, the Vatican announced it had appointed Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain to oversee LCWR, which has been the subject of a doctrinal assessment by the Vatican congregation since 2009.

The group sent an email Thursday to the heads of each of the congregations it represents, explaining how the group became aware of the news.

That email, obtained by *NCR*, says LCWR leadership was in Rome to meet Wednesday with members of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the doctrinal assessment. When the leaders came to the meeting, the congregation had already communicated with the U.S. bishops' conference news of Sartain's appointment, the email states.

Additionally, the email says LCWR membership was told during the meeting that news of the appointment would only be shared Wednesday at the bishops' conference internally and not with the general public in order to give the group time to communicate with its leaders.

"When we met with Cardinal (William) Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on April 18, where we received the assessment results, CDF's communication had already been sent to the USCCB for release at noon," the email states.

"We understood that the documents would be put on USCCB's members-only web page," it continues. "Consequently, we had hoped to communicate the conclusions with you ourselves. That was not possible."

First announcement of Sartain's appointment came in a Wednesday press release from the U.S. bishops' conference, which was accompanied by an eight-page document of the doctrinal congregation and a one-page statement from Levada.

According to the document from the congregation, Sartain is to be given authority over the group in five areas, including:

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- Revising LCWR statutes;
- Reviewing LCWR plans and programs;
- Creating new programs for the organization;
- Reviewing and offering guidance on the application of liturgical texts; and
- Reviewing LCWR's affiliations with other organizations, citing specifically NETWORK and the Resource Center for Religious Institutes.

According to the letter, Sartain's mandate runs for "up to five years, as deemed necessary." Sartain is also expected to set up an advisory team that includes clergy and women religious to "work collaboratively" with LCWR officers and to "report on the progress of this work to the Holy See."

"In this way, the Holy See hopes to offer an important contribution to the future of religious life in the Church in the United States," the letter states.

In an email to *NCR* on Thursday, Annmarie Sanders, LCWR's associate director for communications, said the group's officers have "decided not to do any interviews until they have had time to do a much wider consultation with our board and our members."

"We do not want to proceed with this until we have given this whole matter careful thought and prayer, and know the mind of our members," wrote Sanders, who also serves on *NCR*'s board of directors.

According to the U.S. bishops' release, Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, and Bishop Thomas John Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., will work with Sartain.

The Vatican congregation's doctrinal assessment of LCWR started shortly after the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life announced a separate apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious orders. The results of that study were submitted to Rome in January.

In his letter Wednesday, Levada writes that Sartain's appointment is "aimed at fostering a patient and collaborative renewal of this conference of major superiors in order to provide a stronger doctrinal foundation for its many laudable initiatives and activities."

The document from the congregation re-emphasizes the reason for the doctrinal assessment, writing that Levada told LCWR leadership in 2008 that the congregation had three major areas of concern with the group:

- The content of speakers' addresses at the annual LCWR assemblies;
- "Corporate dissent" in the congregation regarding the church's sexual teachings; and
- "A prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" present in some of the organizations programs and presentations.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer.]

For the full copy of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's letter, **click here**. For the full copy of Levada's letter, **click here**.

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