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In LCWR matter, all must stop, ponder and pray

Isabella R. Moyer | Apr. 23, 2012 NCR Today

"Please give me bigger blindfolds and larger ear plugs or tell me how to continue to belong to a group that constantly tries to discourage my participation."

A friend offered this simple prayer after news broke of the Vatican's doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious [1]. At times like this, I wish I was a pew-warmer Catholic, faithfully fulfilling my obligations while turning a blind eye and deaf ear to the messiness of church politics. But I can't. And this past week has shown that many Catholic women and men can't.

Discussion boards have heated up with predictable reactions from both ends of the trad-lib scale. Support for the sisters and their work is loud, strong and unwavering among those who embrace the renewal efforts of Vatican II. For those who eagerly anticipate a turning back of the clock, the sisters represented by LCWR symbolize the dissident church, straying from both purity of doctrinal teaching and unwavering obedience to the hierarchical leadership. The ideological lines of division are being drawn ever more deeply.

Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, describes his hope [2] that a personal encounter with the congregation and LCWR will allow for "an opportunity to review the document together in a spirit of mutual respect and collaboration, hopefully thereby avoiding possible misunderstandings of the document's intent and scope." A spirit of mutual respect and collaboration is going to be difficult to achieve in the current atmosphere of disappointment and distrust.

Our church leaders should think carefully about how their words and actions are perceived. Gone are the days of letters sent secretly by messengers. Inquisitions taking place behind closed doors. Hushed whispers in curial halls. This is the age of the Internet, and the flock has access to news, resources and documents like never before.

Women and men committed to the church they love are able to listen to many voices and to add their own voice to the dialogue. Bishops need to listen to these voices and take note of the reactions. Rightly or wrongly, the doctrinal assessment of the LCWR is being perceived by many as a bullying tactic from on high with little room for a spirit of mutual respect or collaboration.

The leadership of the LCWR has asked for time to ponder, pray and discern their communal response to the doctrinal assessment. We all need to stop, ponder and pray. We need to temper our thoughts and words to give a reasoned and reasonable response to the issues at hand, for reasoned and reasonable voices are more likely to be heard.

The silver lining in this story is that it will force a larger dialogue about the role of women religious in the church and women's role in general. It is an opportunity to examine, yet again, the present leadership style of some of our bishops. Clericalism and authoritarianism do not model mutual respect and collaboration and are no longer accepted by those who truly seek an adult church.

And perhaps the shiniest silver lining of all, our sisters will hear the many voices of gratitude and appreciation for their faithful service to the church and to the world.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/29834
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