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Sartain: Reform of US nuns group an opportunity for dialogue

Francis X. Rocca Catholic News Service | Apr. 24, 2012

VATICAN CITY -- A newly announced reform of an association of women's religious congregations in the U.S. offers the sisters and their bishops an opportunity to communicate and work together more closely, said the archbishop named by the Vatican to oversee the reform process.

Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle spoke to Catholic News Service in Rome April 22, a day after arriving for a periodic "ad limina" visit to the Vatican.

The Vatican announced April 18 that Archbishop Sartain will provide "review, guidance and approval, where necessary, of the work" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious for a period of up to five years. His tasks will include overseeing revision of the LCWR's statutes, review of its liturgical practices, and the creation of formation programs for the conference's member congregations.

The LCWR, a Maryland-based umbrella group that claims about 1,500 leaders of U.S. women's communities as members, represents about 80 percent of the country's 57,000 women religious.

In an eight-page, "doctrinal assessment" based on an investigation that began in April 2008, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reported that the "current doctrinal and pastoral situation of LCWR is grave and a matter of serious concern." The assessment cited deviations from Catholic teaching in areas including abortion, euthanasia, women's ordination and homosexuality.

Archbishop Sartain said that his main role in the reform process would be to "facilitate relationships and understanding."

Saying that he hoped he could "help the sisters and the LCWR recognize that we are all in this together," the archbishop called the reform a "great opportunity" for women religious, U.S. bishops and the Vatican to "strengthen and improve all of our relationships on every level."

Noting his extensive experience with religious communities in the four dioceses where he has served as a priest or bishop, the archbishop expressed his "personal appreciation for the role of religious women in the United States" and "all the extraordinary things that they've done."

Archbishop Sartain said he expected to meet with the LCWR "very soon," and declined in the meantime to discuss the reform process in any detail. But he said that he and his two assistants, Bishop Leonard P. Blair of Toledo, Ohio, and Bishop Thomas J. Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., would be assembling an advisory committee to include women religious with expertise in theology and canon law, among other fields.

"We'll have ample opportunity for conversation and dialogue about all the issues," the archbishop said.

The archbishop dismissed press reports suggesting that the doctrinal congregation's action was a response to widespread support by women religious of the Obama administration's health care reform law, which the U.S.

bishops have argued does not adequately protect rights to conscientious objection or guarantee against federal funding of abortion.

"There's been nothing in any conversation that I have had about the (doctrinal) assessment that would indicate to me that there would be any truth to that," he said.

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