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In LCWR oversight, key questions remain

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 24, 2012

Bishop Leonard Blair, Archbishop Peter Sartain and Bishop Thomas Paprocki (CNS photos)

Almost a week after the Vatican ordered the largest leadership organization for U.S. women religious to reform and place itself under the authority of an archbishop, many questions remain about the origin of the order and the process by which it was communicated.

Central in those questions is what role the U.S. bishops' conference might have had in shaping the move and how it plans to work with Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain as he undertakes his role as "archbishop delegate" for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The U.S. bishops' conference issued a press release at about noon EST April 18, announcing that the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which began a "doctrinal assessment" of LCWR in 2009, had ordered the group to reform its statutes, programs and affiliations and had appointed Sartain to oversee the changes.

According to that release, which was accompanied by an eight-page document of the doctrinal congregation and a one-page statement from its head, Cardinal William Levada, Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, and Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., will work with Sartain.

Spokespersons for the bishops' conference, Sartain, Blair and Paprocki shed little light on the Vatican's order. Each provided little comment on how the conference and the individual bishops view their roles in LCWR's revision. Each also would not respond to questions about the involvement of the U.S. bishops' conference in the matter.

Asked about the U.S. bishops? involvement, Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the bishops? conference, replied: ?The document came from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.?

In response to a request for comment from Sartain on how he sees his new role, Greg Magnoni, director of the office of communications for the Archdiocese of Seattle, said that ?the archbishop is not making any public comments until he has had an opportunity to meet with LCWR leaders.?

In a report Monday, Sartain told Catholic News Service [1] he thought his main role in the revision of LCWR would be to "facilitate relationships and understanding."

Blair?s spokesperson referred all questions regarding the matter to Sartain ?because he is the delegate? and Paprocki?s spokesperson referred all questions to Walsh, saying ?she is handling the media relations on this.?

Walsh, responding to questions about the process involved in notifying LCWR of the Vatican?s order and in how Sartain and the bishops would function, spoke slowly, clearly measuring her words.

Walsh would not expand on the U.S. bishops' involvement in the order, but said she expected an advisory team the Vatican document suggested Sartain form would do the primary work of LCWR oversight. She said the logical thing would be for a committee to be developed at the bishops' conference to support the work.

"There will be a committee and it will probably be connected to the committee on doctrine," Walsh said. "But the committee -- or whatever it's going to be called -- the committee, or subcommittee, clearly reports directly to the Holy See."

The U.S. bishops' doctrine committee attracted controversy last year when it condemned St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's 2007 book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*.

That condemnation was criticized by some, including the leadership of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the College Theology Society, when it came without dialog with Johnson, seemingly in contrast with the U.S. bishops' own rules regarding handling of disputes between bishops and theologians.

In a phone call on Friday, Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, a member of the staff of that committee, did not answer questions about the Vatican document on LCWR, saying the bishops' communications office wanted press to "go through them rather than start out with me."

Asked what contribution the U.S. bishops? doctrine committee may have had to the Vatican?s order, Weinandy responded: "I can?t answer these questions."

Walsh also clarified the process by which the U.S. bishops' conference and the Vatican had decided to notify the public of Sartain's appointment. A Thursday email from the LCWR to heads of congregations to women religious said though the group was told in an April 18 meeting with members of the Vatican congregation in Rome that the order would only initially be made public to U.S. bishops, it was made public immediately.

Walsh said "it was agreed" between members of the U.S. bishops' conference and the Vatican congregation that the announcement "would be public at noontime on Wednesday. And that the bishops, as which pretty much is the custom here, would receive the materials ahead of time."

Asked what the protocol is for how long the bishops would know of a document like this before the public were informed, Walsh replied: ?A few hours.?

Magoni and the spokespersons for Blair and Paprocki would not answer questions about how the bishops became aware of their roles to help revise LCWR.

Asked what the bishops? conference might say to those who see the Vatican?s order toward the LCWR negatively, Walsh said, ?I think the bishops? conference has nothing to say about that.?

"Everything is in the statement," she said. "If you read the statement, it's pretty clear what the concerns of the Vatican were. And the Vatican has been discussing them since 2008 or so. And so they moved the discussion

on."

In response to a comment that as a women religious and as an official spokeswoman, she must find herself in a difficult position, Walsh replied: "Yes, I am. And I love my sisters. And I'm trying to explain to them what the Vatican does."

According to the April 18 document from the Vatican congregation, Sartain is to be given authority over LCWR in five areas, including:

- 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.

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.

One sister who works as advocate for Catholic issues in Washington said she thought the Vatican's document "certainly" was influenced by members of the U.S. bishops' conference.

"Clearly, the U.S. bishops are involved in this," said Sr. Simone Campbell, a member of the Sisters of Social Service and executive director of NETWORK, a Catholic political lobbying group. "Clearly church politics, as well as I think some secular politics, were playing into this."

In what some see as a reference to LCWR's support of NETWORK initiatives to advance U.S. health care reform, the Vatican congregation's document announcing the LCWR order said "while there has been a great deal of work on the part of LCWR promoting issues of social justice in harmony with the Church's social doctrine, it is silent on the right to life from conception to natural death, a question that is part of the lively public debate about abortion and euthanasia in the United States."

Campbell said she thinks there is a culture clash between the sisters and members of the episcopate who don't understand the nature of U.S. political discourse, referring to LCWR's support of health care reform and whether it played into the Vatican's order.

"The irony is that we who exercise a democratic right, which Catholic social teaching makes very clear we're supposed to do, would be questioned by a canonical organization," Campbell said. "Does that mean all political, democratic activity is to be limited by bishops?"

"The church is not used to a democratic culture, which leads me to think that the real fight is about the inculturation of our faith into a democratic culture," she continued. "Because the culture in Rome is a monarchy, and in a monarchy, you can control what everybody says. But in a democracy, we experience the truth, and it's found when we have questioning and vigorous debate. And in the end, truth emerges."

"The deep value for me in our culture in the United States is that we work hard to value everyone's contribution," Campbell said. "We're not perfect. We've got a long way to go. But it's really a key piece of who we are, that we struggle to have everyone's voice involved."

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