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Vatican concerns puzzle resource center leaders

Jerry Filteau | May. 21, 2012

SILVER SPRING, Md. -- One of two organizations named in the Vatican-ordered reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious advised women religious on their canonical and financial rights during the Vatican?s recent three-year apostolic investigation of U.S. women?s orders.

In its eight-page April 18 document calling for a reform of LCWR, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith mentions the Resource Center for Religious Institutes twice.

?We worked with women?s communities during the apostolic visitation and we worked with LCWR during the [separate] doctrinal assessments? that culminated in the new document from the doctrinal congregation, Benedictine Fr. Daniel Ward, the center?s executive director, told *NCR*.

?But under canon law everybody has a right to canonical counsel,? he added.

He said the center was formed to assist orders and congregations of men and women religious with professional advice on issues of finances, canon law and civil law. It also assists LCWR and its counterpart for male religious, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, in those areas.

When asked if the fact that some religious communities of women declined to respond to the visitation questionnaire may have played a role in the Vatican?s looking into the center, Ward said, ?We never gave advice not to answer the questionnaires.?

The congregation?s document says that in June 2010, Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, presented to the congregation ?further documentation ... on the organizations associated with the LCWR, namely Network and the Resource Center for Religious Institutes,? but gives no details on what the documentation covered or what was found objectionable.

The fifth of five Vatican mandates given to the bishop delegate appointed to review, guide and approve the work of LCWR is ?to review LCWR links with affiliated organizations, e.g. Network [the Catholic social justice lobby] and Resource Center for Religious Life.? (?Institutes,? not ?Life,? was clearly what was intended in the text.)

The two top officials of the Resource Center told *NCR* that they have no idea why the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith named the center as a possible source of concern.

?I don?t know. There hasn?t been anything specific,? said Sr. Hertha Longo, chief financial officer of the Sisters of St. Agnes in Fond du Lac, Wis., and president of the Resource Center.

Ward, who is a canon lawyer and a civil lawyer, also expressed some puzzlement. ?We?ve never been contacted by them [the doctrinal congregation],? he said. The center?s offices are in Silver Spring, a Maryland suburb of Washington, in the same building that houses the national headquarters of LCWR and the Conference of Major

Superiors of Men.

In phone interviews, Longo and Ward said the center?s services include expert advice on everything from tax law on earnings of members of religious institutes to special Social Security rules governing those in ministry and religious orders, from civil and church law governing properties owned by religious institutes to civil and church laws and rules of procedure when a member of a religious institute is accused of sexually abusing a minor.

Longo said the center serves about 550 U.S. religious institutes, with the major superiors and the treasurers or chief financial officers of those institutes as the main client members.

She said leaders of religious institutes who hold membership in the resource center and utilize its programs, expertise and other resources include not just those in CMSM and LCWR, but also leaders in the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious and in cloistered contemplative communities of women whose superiors belong to neither of those national, Vatican-recognized organizations for heads of women religious. (See accompanying story.)

Why the doctrinal congregation?s assessment of LCWR would also include a call to assess the Resource Center for Religious Institutes -- which equally serves many other religious not under Vatican investigation -- seemed somewhat of a mystery on the face of it, unless conservative U.S. Catholic players were behind it.

In a recent blog interview for the *National Catholic Register*, Ann Carey alleged that the religious institutes relying on the center?s financial and canon and civil law resources ?got some very non-orthodox people giving advice.?

Carey is author of a 1996 book, *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women?s Religious Communities*, that was highly critical of LCWR and of the path of renewal of religious life taken by LCWR?s member congregations since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Carey asserted, according to the interview transcript posted by the blogger, Jimmy Akin, ?In fact, the leader of the whole office now, a Benedictian [sic] priest, Fr. Dan Ward, back in 2008, assisted an order of three Benedictian women in Madison, WS [sic]. These three women decided that they no longer wanted to be a Catholic order, they wanted to be ecumenical. ... He helped these three women become non-canonical, become ecumenical, and keep all the property. Which I probably think is not canonical.?

When asked about Carey?s allegation, Ward said she misrepresented the case. In fact, he said, the two -- not three -- Catholic Benedictines in the Wisconsin monastery, with the support of their elder members, had fully followed church law on alienation (transfer) of church property. (Later in the *Register* blog interview, Carey corrected herself, acknowledging that there were two original Benedictines involved and the third woman she was thinking of, now a member of the monastery, was originally a Protestant minister.)

Holy Wisdom Monastery, run by the Benedictine Women of Madison, now describes itself as an ?ecumenical monastic community? that ?invites single women of any Christian denomination to visit the monastery and explore a call to monastic life.?

The third community member, Sr. Lynne Smith, joined the monastery in 2000 as its first Protestant member after serving as a Presbyterian pastor in Kansas and Iowa for 15 years.

Like the Taizé ecumenical community in France, the Benedictine Women of Madison offer retreats and other spiritual services, including community prayer several times a day and ecumenical worship services on Sundays.

Ward said the Benedictine nuns did not need to get Vatican or local diocesan approval to transfer the community?s property, already being used as a monastery and retreat house, to their new ecumenical mission. The value of the property was below the threshold at which such clearance would be necessary, he said.

He said that, as he recalled the situation, when the bishop of Madison asked the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life about the validity of the property transfer, the congregation, which oversees all institutes of men and women religious, responded that -- contrary to Carey?s claim -- it had all been done in accord with church law.

He said that in order to become an ecumenical monastery, the two Benedictines subsequently sought and obtained valid dispensations from the Holy See from their vows as Catholic nuns. While they personally remain Catholic, their monastic orientation is ecumenical, inviting Christians from other denominations, including Protestants with little or no history of monasticism, to explore monastic life.

Longo said her field is finances and she did not know enough about the canonical details of the Madison Benedictines to comment on it. But she defended the Resource Center?s work. Especially for new treasurers or financial officers of those institutes, the center?s annual workshops on issues such as federal and state laws governing taxation of religious earnings and religious property, how Social Security rules apply to members of religious orders, and a variety of other legal and financial issues are quite valuable, she said.

The center itself is only three years old but is the result of a merger of two older organizations -- the National Association of Treasurers of Religious Institutes, which was formed in 1981 by LCWR to assist institutes on financial matters, and the Legal Resource Center for Religious, jointly formed by LCWR and CMSM around the same time to assist institutes in legal matters, civil and canonical. Both organizations shared office space in the same building housing the men and women religious leadership organizations, and in 2009 they merged to form the Resource Center for Religious Institutes.

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