

Archbishop Sartain, man appointed to oversee U.S. sisters, gives take on role

Joshua J. McElwee | Jun. 1, 2012 NCR Today

The archbishop appointed by the Vatican to have unprecedented authority over the organization representing the broad majority of U.S. women religious has spoken for the first time on his new role, saying he "gladly" accepted the appointment and sees it as an "opportunity to seek reconciliation."

Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain, who was announced in April as "archbishop delegate" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), speaks for the first time [in an article published today by *America* magazine](#) [1].

Publishing of Sartain's remarks comes the same day LCWR [issued their first official statement regarding the Vatican move](#) [2], saying it comes from a flawed process and has caused "scandal and pain throughout the church."

In his lengthy piece, written by the archbishop himself, Sartain frames the Vatican rebuke of U.S. women religious as one of a series of "inevitable conflicts and misunderstandings between religious congregations and their bishops."

"Disagreements regarding mission, apostolate, discipline, doctrine, style of life and personality have often been at the core of such conflicts," writes Sartain. "Each situation was an opportunity to seek reconciliation and collaboration at the heart of the church, in the *communio* that is God's gift. Such a pivotal opportunity is now before us."

Continuing on in the over 2,500 word piece, Sartain rehashes much of what has already been reported regarding the Vatican move, but also defends at length some of the particular criticisms made of the sisters' group, as outlined by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in a letter announcing the order April 18.

Among the criticisms made in that Vatican letter were the content of speakers' addresses at annual LCWR assemblies.

"Though not intended to serve as theological treatises *per se*, some of these addresses and documents have theological undertones or implications not consistent with church teaching," writes Sartain. "Others have directly contradicted church teaching, and still others are not grounded in faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and redeemer."

It what seems to be a reference to a presentation at the 2007 LCWR assembly by Dominican Sr. Laurie Brink, Sartain writes that "assembly presentations have at times proposed models of religious life that are not in sync with the very nature of religious life."

Brink's address, which was also specifically highlighted in the Vatican's letter, focused on different ways that members of religious congregations view their vocations.

Addressing his own appointment as "archbishop delegate" of the sisters group, Sartain says he decided to accept the role out of a recognition of "the importance L.C.W.R. holds for the vast majority of American religious congregations."

"Recognizing the momentous and heroic contribution of women religious in the United States, having had the honor and joy of collaborating with thousands of religious in the dioceses I have served, and knowing the importance the L.C.W.R. holds for the vast majority of American religious congregations, I gladly accepted the appointment as archbishop delegate for the implementation of the doctrinal assessment," writes Sartain.

"No one expects that such a sensitive task will be accomplished quickly or effortlessly, but by God's grace and with mutual respect, patience and prayer it can be indeed accomplished for the good of all. Challenges larger than this have been met before, with renewal and even deeper faith the outcome."

First news of the Vatican's order to sisters' group came in a press release from the U.S. bishops' conference April 18, which announced that the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by Cardinal William Levada, had given the order for LCWR's revision.

The Vatican congregation had begun an investigation of the group, known as a "doctrinal assessment," in 2009. The release from the bishops' conference also stated that Sartain had been appointed "archbishop delegate" for LCWR and had been granted wide-ranging authority over the group.

According to that release, Sartain is to be assisted in that role by Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, and Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill.

According to the April 18 document from the Vatican congregation, Sartain is to be given authority over LCWR in five areas, including revision of its statues, plans and programs, and "offering guidance on the application of liturgical texts."

[Friday's statement from the LCWR](#) [2] said that during special meetings this week LCWR national board members raised concerns about "both the content of the doctrinal assessment and the process by which it was prepared" and that the group's president and executive director will soon travel to Rome to "raise and discuss" their concerns with Sartain and Levada.

"Board members concluded that the assessment was based on unsubstantiated accusations and the result of a flawed process that lacked transparency," states the LCWR statement.

"Moreover, the sanctions imposed were disproportionate to the concerns raised and could compromise their ability to fulfill their mission. The report has furthermore caused scandal and pain throughout the church community, and created greater polarization."

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[1] http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=13456

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