

LCWR leader: Meeting with Vatican an opportunity for dialogue

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Jenner Mathiasen, center, of Seattle takes part in a May vigil outside St. James Cathedral in Seattle to support sisters against the Vatican's call for a reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (CNS/Stephen Brashear)

VATICAN CITY -- After meeting with top officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the head of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious said she was thankful for the chance to have an open dialogue about a recent Vatican-ordered reform of the organization.

Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, LCWR president, and St. Joseph Sr. Janet Mock, executive director, met Tuesday with U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada, prefect of the doctrinal congregation, and with Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle to talk about the mandate.

"We are grateful for the opportunity for open dialogue, and now we will return to our members to see about the next step" and decide how to proceed in light of discussions with the doctrinal office, Farrell told journalists after the meeting.

The LCWR will have an assembly in August, she said, and "we have no plan other than to take what came from the meeting today to our members" and decide as a group what the next step should be.

"We were able to directly express our concerns to Cardinal Levada and Archbishop Sartain," Farrell said in a statement released by the LCWR headquarters.

The Vatican statement about the meeting said the encounter "provided the opportunity for the congregation and the LCWR officers to discuss the issues and concerns raised by the doctrinal assessment."

The Vatican said the gathering took place "in an atmosphere of openness and cordiality."

According to canon law, the Vatican said, the LCWR "is constituted by and remains under the supreme direction of the Holy See in order to promote common efforts" and cooperation.

"The purpose of the doctrinal assessment is to assist the LCWR in this important mission by promoting a vision of ecclesial communion founded on faith in Jesus Christ and the teachings of the church as faithfully taught

through the ages under the guidance of the magisterium," the Vatican said.

The meeting came after the doctrinal congregation announced in April that a major reform was needed to ensure the LCWR's fidelity to Catholic teaching in areas including abortion, euthanasia, women's ordination and homosexuality.

The call for organizational reform came with an eight-page "doctrinal assessment" that cited "serious doctrinal problems which affect many in consecrated life." The problems, it said, were revealed in an assessment originally ordered by the Vatican in April 2008.

The doctrinal congregation had said that "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."

The doctrinal congregation appointed Sartain to provide "review, guidance and approval, where necessary, of the work" of LCWR, a Maryland-based umbrella group that claims about 1,500 leaders of U.S. women's communities as members and represents about 80 percent of the country's 57,000 women religious.

Sartain's tasks were to include overseeing the revision of the LCWR's statutes, the review of its liturgical practices, and the creation of formation programs for the conference's member congregations.

He said earlier this month that both he and doctrinal congregation officials "are wholeheartedly committed to dealing with the important issues raised by the doctrinal assessment and the LCWR board in an atmosphere of openness, honesty, integrity and fidelity to the church's faith."

He had said the meeting in Rome would be part of a process of continuing to "collaborate in promoting the important work of the LCWR for consecrated life in the United States."

In written statement released June 1, the national board of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious said it felt the assessment that led to a Vatican order to reform the organization "was based on unsubstantiated accusations and the result of a flawed process that lacked transparency."

The LCWR board called the sanctions "disproportionate to the concerns raised" and said they "could compromise" the organization's ability "to fulfill their mission."

In an interview with Catholic News Service in Washington in early June, Farrell said the organization planned to move slowly and prayerfully, "one step at a time," in collaboration with LCWR members at the regional and national levels.

"We need to walk through this one door at a time and to see how this process unfolds and to follow that path as long as we can respond with integrity," she said.

One major concern is how differences of opinion or position are handled in the church, she said. There is a "need for the opportunity to air differences in a respectful and open way and the conditions for that kind of dialogue have not always been present," she said.

She added that "it's no secret that there is a good deal of polarization in the church in the United States and around the world, and I think that is something that's at the root of (the reform order); it's the different visions of church out of which were operating."

While women religious have taken the Second Vatican Council and its call for renewal "very seriously" the past

half-century, she said, "there are other visions and models of church that have been growing in the last number of years and I think that's a tension."

Another source of tension, she had said, was over the legitimate role and functions of religious women in the life of the church with respect to its hierarchy. "I think we do need to do better education about the meaning of religious life and what is our role in the church that's not always been understood," she said.

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