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LCWR, the bishops and dialogue

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NCR Today

Dialogue is needed in our world and in our church. How does dialogue differ from debate? Both dialogue and debate present diverse viewpoints of a specific issue, but they differ in their focus and in their goals. In a dialogue, we listen in order to learn and better understand the other person. We accept that differences may continue to exist, but we seek common ground on which to build. In a debate, we listen in order to find the weakness in the other's view so we can prove them wrong and ourselves right. A debate ends with a winner and a loser. A dialogue acknowledges that the journey is ongoing.

Here's a simple way to analyze your listening style: When someone is speaking, are you already formulating a response in your mind before they have finished? Are you impatiently waiting for a chance to jump in or interrupt the speaker with your wisdom? Are you reading my words while mentally typing out a rebuttal? Then you are probably more inclined to debate than dialogue.

The old adage that God gave us two ears and only one mouth reminds us of the importance of active listening. This does not mean we sit back as passive doormats and allow others to pontificate at length. This is not dialogue. We need to know when to speak and when to listen. And when we speak, we must choose our words carefully. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious is showing us how to do this.

Today, the LCWR and the Vatican released brief announcements following the well-publicized and much anticipated meeting between LCWR president Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, executive director St. Joseph Sr. Janet Mock, Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Archbishop J. Peter Sartain.

In both statements, the words were few, but the messages spoke loud and clear. The bishops reiterated their ecclesial authority over LCWR and were ready 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 LCWR simply stated they "will gather its members in regional meetings and in its August assembly to determine its course of action in response to the CDF assessment." In the meantime, no interviews will be given.

The women of the LCWR continue to dialogue. While the rest of us are releasing our own anger and frustration in vigorous debates, the women religious are showing patience and restraint. Their leaders know the importance of seeking the collective wisdom of those they represent. Their public silence reflects the need to pray, ponder and dialogue in order to give an effective response. While we continue to show our active and prayerful support, we must respect this silence. It demands to be respected, for it is a model for us all in this increasingly polarized atmosphere.

The sisters face a daunting task ahead. Dialogue is seldom easy. As with any group, it would be naïve to assume unanimity among all the membership of the LCWR. Their challenge is to seek unity amid the diversity of thought. Based on the care that has been shown in their communal deliberations to this point, the sisters seem ready for this challenge.

Dialogue with the bishops is the greater challenge. We do not know what happened within the walls of the Vatican on Tuesday. Did both sides have sufficient time to speak and be heard? Were judgments put aside in order to listen more openly and carefully to each other? Were spirits and hopes raised, or hearts sunk?

The brief statement from the Vatican press does not give much hope. Affirming and repeating one's authority and the need for obedience to that authority do not reflect a desire for open and honest dialogue. It doesn't even open the doors for a respectful debate.

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