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Sartain: LCWR dialogue a 'work in progress'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 13, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- Archbishop James Peter Sartain of Seattle has what it is arguably the toughest assignment facing any American bishop at the moment, given both the intense public interest and the complexity of the issues involved. As of April 18, Sartain, 60, became the Vatican's point man for what it describes as a "renewal," and what others see as a "crackdown," of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

In his dealings with the largest umbrella group for leaders of women's religious in America, Sartain is to be assisted by Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, who conducted a review of the group on behalf of the Vatican, and Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill.

Sartain is in Rome this week primarily to take part in yesterday's meeting between two representatives of the LCWR and the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which issued an April 18 doctrinal assessment of LCWR charging it with "serious doctrinal errors" and "doctrinal confusion" and calling for sweeping changes in the way it does business.

To date, Sartain has largely tried to stay out of the limelight. That's in part a question of personality, and in part because Sartain says he doesn't want to take public positions that might close off his options or make dialogue more difficult.

On Wednesday morning, however, Sartain sat down for an interview with NCR to discuss the June 12 meeting, and, more broadly, where the process with the LCWR goes from here.

The following is a transcript of that interview, which took place at the North American College, the residence for American seminarians in Rome.

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Interview with Archbishop J. Peter Sartain
June 13, 2012

***NCR*: How did you think the meeting yesterday went?**

Sartain: I thought it went fine. It was a cordial meeting, and Sr. Pat and Sr. Janet had the opportunity to lay out the concerns they wanted to come and lay out before us. Cardinal Levada and I both listened attentively. I took some notes, so I didn't lose track of what they wanted to say. From that perspective, I really felt it went well. I had a little chance to talk with them privately afterwards, and I also found that helpful.

This was more a meeting to share concerns, as opposed to making decisions?

Absolutely. As you know, the two sisters from the LCWR who came had asked for the meeting to ask some clarifying questions. I don't think any of us went into it with the expectation that it was to decide something. It was just to clarify things, and I think we did that.

What was clarified?

It happened because the sisters wanted to express what their concerns were. They had a couple of specific areas they wanted to go into with us about the doctrinal assessment itself, and so we spent our time talking about those specific things. Honestly, I'd rather leave it up to them to say what those specific concerns were.

It seems this is your approach ? rather than laying out things yourself, to try to defer to the sisters and allow them to set the pace. Is that right?

I wouldn't quite say that, but from the beginning my goal has been to develop good relations with them so the process of renewal can proceed in the spirit of a good relationship. I have not wanted to second-guess them, or to make statements on their behalf, or to interpret anything they have said. That's really my goal in all this, to establish from the very beginning a good working relationship so that we can proceed in that context.

Do you feel that relationship has been established?

I think we're getting there.

In my interview with Cardinal Levada yesterday, I asked him what would count in the short term as proof that things are headed in the right direction, and he said for LCWR to enter into a "sincere, cordial, and open dialogue" with you. He also said that hasn't happened yet. Do you agree?

I would say it's a work in progress. We really are at the very beginning. It's been less than two months since the assessment, and their board meeting just happened at the end of May. We're at the beginning of a process that's going to take some time. My goal, again, is to build relationships and then go from there. I think we're on the way. We haven't come to any decision points yet.

Have you set a date for your next meeting with LCWR?

No, one of the things we decided yesterday was that when we get back to the States we're going to look at our calendars and decide that.

Do you think it will happen before or after their August assembly?

I'm not exactly sure, because that's why we need to check our calendars. That's all we agreed to do yesterday as we were parting.

Are you thinking it might be more productive to wait for that assembly to happen and see what comes out of it?

That's quite possible, that we would wait until after the assembly.

I know that you're hesitant to put things out publicly, but can you talk about how you see the process working from here? You've been given a five-year term, so in a sense the clock is ticking. Do you have any sense of concretely how you'll sequence things?

As of yet, no. Because the LCWR serves as a vehicle among the religious communities who are members, and also between it and the Holy See and the bishops, it seems to me that one of the first types of discussion I want to have, on a broader scale, is how do we understand what religious life is in the church? Once we have some discussion about that, I think it will help to clarify my understanding of where the LCWR is coming from.

Obviously, the church has a very clear understanding of what religious life is, and I subscribe to that and have great admiration for it. I feel that the place of religious life in the church is absolutely pivotal and essential to who we are. The place of consecrated life is very important. So, think it's important for me and the bishops who are helping me, and the others who will eventually be on our team, along with LCWR, to talk about what the church understands as religious life and its place.

One of the concerns I've had in the last month or so is that some people have understood the doctrinal assessment and the process that's taking place as a lack of appreciation for religious life, or for religious women, or specific women in religious life. That's not at all the sense I've gotten about it, and it's certainly not the mandate I've been given. This is about the LCWR, not about specific religious congregations or individuals. My very clear impression is that, both from the Holy Father and from Cardinal Levada, this comes out of a profound appreciation for religious life. It's not about shunning, it's about profound gratitude.

You're saying that the church doesn't intervene on things it doesn't care about?

tI think that's true. It doesn't intervene on things that aren't important, and this is very important.

tAlso, I think there is a clear appreciation for the contribution of American religious, which is extraordinary. I think that also is a part of the Holy Father's concern, as well as Cardinal Levada and the Holy See. They value the extraordinary accomplishments and continued importance of religious life in the United States.

You mentioned there will be others on your team, meaning consulters and experts advising you. Have you given any thought to who those people might be, and what their roles will be?

What I've begun doing already is asking various folks, including the executive committee of LCWR, and others as well, including the two bishops assisting me, to make recommendations as to who could help us in this whole process. Ultimately, as I envision it myself, those who I would ask to be part of the team would be asked to participate specifically because of what they could bring to the discussion, in light of how I assess it early on.

In other words, you have to figure out what the needs are before you can determine who can fill those needs?

That's exactly right.

In terms of obvious things, do you suppose you'll need at least one expert on the part of canon law that deal with religious life, one expert on the spiritual of religious life, and so on?

tThose are the kinds of things I would be looking for, but I haven't delineated them specifically yet. Obviously, those are among the areas we'll have to look at, but it's premature to start talking about who specifically might be asked.

Any sense of how many consulters and experts we're talking about?

tNo, it's just too early.

The doctrinal assessment gives you a sort of 'to-do list' of things this overhaul is supposed to include, such as the revision of LCWR's statutes, review of its publications, and so on. Is any of that negotiable? Is it possible that the spirit of the renewal could be achieved without necessarily ticking off all the specific points in the assessment?

tI understand the question ? do we look at those things as a check-list, or sort of as a means to an end? I think the doctrinal assessment clearly shows the things that have arisen as concerns, and so those areas of concern have to be specific parts of our discussion. As we have those discussions with the executive committee of LCWR and whoever else might be a part of that, perhaps some things can be clarified. Some things might be dealt with or understood more easily than others. That's how I understand it at this point.

In those discussions, is it possible that a different, maybe even better, way to achieve the end of the process than the specific steps on paper right now might emerge?

tI think that's quite possible. I don't know yet, but I'm open to that. I think that's within the purview of what I've been asked to do.

As you know, much of the reaction to your appointment was positive, with people saying you're an open person and a man of dialogue. There was, however, also criticism, in part focused on your sister, who's a Nashville Dominican, an order which belongs to the Council of Major Superiors of Religious Women, often perceived as a more traditional rival to the LCWR. Does that create a conflict of interest?

tI was surprised when that started to arise among some circles as an objection. First of all, my sister is not involved in this at all. Frankly, she and I haven't even discussed it. I've asked her for her prayers, and she's assured me of her prayers, but that's it. Our family inherited, especially from our mom, a sense of discretion about things. I think my sister and I have a mutual understanding that doesn't need to be spoken that this is a task I've been given by the Holy Father, and it's not the kind of thing she and I need to discuss. We haven't, and I don't think that we will, other than a continued indication from her that she'll keep me in her prayers.

The fact that your sister is part of an order that belongs to CMSWR doesn't give you any bias or prejudice against LCWR?

tI appreciate your asking that. That's absolutely not the case. I don't come at this with a bias because of my sister being a part of that congregation, or any bias at all for that matter.

Do you believe this can work?

Yes, absolutely. I say this from the bottom of my heart: Because I believe so much in the presence of Christ in the church, that Christ wants his name known, he wants to be proclaimed, I also believe the Holy Spirit is very much present in this process, and so I'm hopeful.

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