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More priests, brothers express support for LCWR

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The crest of the Xavier Brothers (Image taken from the Xavier Brothers' website)

Two orders of priests and brothers have sent separate letters of support to the leaders of the group representing the majority of U.S. sisters expressing "appreciation" and "deep gratitude" for the work of the sisters in the wake of the Vatican's crackdown on their group.

Taken together, the letters represent the third and fourth such sign of support for the sisters from male orders and seem to indicate there may be ongoing discussions among other men religious about how to respond to the Vatican's move.

News of the letters comes two days after representatives of the sisters' group, known as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), met in Rome with Cardinal William Levada, the head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which in April ordered to group to revise and place itself under the authority of three bishops.

While Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, the LCWR's president, described [1] that Tuesday meeting as "open," Levada warned [2] there is a risk of a "dialogue of the deaf."

The letters, dated June 6 and June 9 respectively, come from the Cincinnati province of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood and from the international head office of the Xaverian brothers.

Br. Lawrence Harvey, the general superior of the Xaverian brothers who sent the letter from his order, said the brothers wanted to let the sisters know that "we're supporting them and the way they've chosen to respond to the process."

"Obviously we're concerned with the whole investigation of the LCWR and certainly wanted to show our support to the sisters," Harvey said. "And in so many ways, as a group of lay religious ... we're in some ways more like the sisters than we are like the clerical congregations."

In the letter from the Cincinnati province of the Precious Blood Missionaries, provincial director Fr. Larry J. Hemmelgarn writes to Farrell that the members of the province decided to send a letter of "appreciation and support" following a unanimous vote on the matter during the province's annual assembly in May.

"It is my honor and privilege to write this letter on behalf of our Province," Hemmelgarn writes. "The ministry of the American Sisters is recognized in every aspect of our lives. From Catholic school education to Catholic hospitals to feeding and caring for the poor and marginalized, the entire country has benefitted from the works of dedicated religious Sisters who do their work faithfully for the honor and glory of God and to assist God's people in innumerable and immeasurable ways."

Ending his letter by noting that Precious Blood priests "continue to work hand-in-hand with Sisters in our parishes, ministries in the USA and overseas, and in our Precious Blood Leadership Conference," Hemmelgarn writes: "May God continue to bless you in your endeavors and know that you are in our prayers."

In the letter from the Xaverian Brothers, Harvey writes to Farrell and the LCWR board that he wants to express "prayerful support, deep gratitude, and profound respect" for the sisters on behalf of his order's general council and leadership team.

"Individually and as a community, we are grateful for the many ways in which you have modeled for us a faithfulness and creativity in enlivening your charisms in response to the signs of the times and the needs of today's complex world," Harvey writes. "We have been blessed by your example and your collaboration with us in ministries, shared formation experiences and honest dialog."

Harvey continues:

"We greatly respect the way in which you have responded prayerfully, collaboratively and authentically to the initial assessment by the CDF. We hope and pray that the integrity of your response will help to bring about a dialog marked by mutuality, trust, honesty and transparency. Our society and our church -- both so marred by divisiveness and polarization today -- need this witness."

The Cincinnati province of the Precious Blood Missionaries is one of three provinces the international order maintains in the United States and represents members in California, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. The

generalate of the Xavieran Brothers represents the brothers around the world, where, according to their website, they minister across 10 countries and four continents.

The previous letters of support for LCWR came from Franciscan brothers and priests as well as the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), an umbrella group that represents all of the orders of men religious in the United States.

In their open letter [3], made public June 7, seven provinces of Franciscan brothers and priests said the Vatican move on the sisters' group seems "excessive."

"Rather than excessive oversight of LCWR, perhaps a better service to the people of God might be a renewed effort to articulate the nuances of our complex moral tradition," the Franciscans wrote. "This can be a teaching moment rather than a moment of regulation -- an opportunity to bring our faith to bear on the complexity of public policy particularly in the midst of our quadrennial elections."

In its letter, made public June 8, the CMSM offered its "prayerful support" to LCWR leaders as they were preparing to meet with Levada.

The CMSM statement said its members "have been inspired by the sisters' promotion of Catholic social teaching, their service to so many in health care and education, and their fidelity to the Gospel and service in the Church."

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