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New Vatican doctrinal chief talks about SSPX, LCWR discussions

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Jul. 25, 2012

VATICAN CITY -- Asked about how he would handle the most controversial cases he inherited, the new head of the Vatican's doctrinal office said, "For the future of the church, it's important to overcome ideological conflicts from whatever side they come."

German Archbishop Gerhard L. Muller, named prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in early July, told the Vatican newspaper that the congregation's discussions with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X and with the U.S. Leadership Conference of Women Religious would focus on the fact that being Catholic means believing what the church teaches.

Although he has been a member of the congregation for five years, Muller told *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, that it would take him some time to get up to speed on all of the details of the congregation's work.

But, in the interview published Wednesday, the archbishop was asked what he thought about the ongoing discussions aimed at bringing the traditionalist SSPX back into full communion with the church and about the congregation-ordered reform of the LCWR, the organization that brings together the superiors of most religious orders of women in the United States.

Apparently referring to the talks with the SSPX, which rejects certain reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council, Muller said, "One cannot make reference to the tradition of the church and then accept only parts of it."

In an apparent reference to the LCWR, he said, "One cannot profess the three religious vows (poverty, chastity and obedience) and not take them seriously."

Speaking about the role of women in the church, the archbishop said, "For the Catholic church it is completely obvious that men and women have the same value."

Many supporters of the ordination of women, he said, "ignore an important aspect of priestly ministry," which is that it is not a position of power. It's a mistake to think "emancipation will occur only when everyone can occupy" that role, he said.

"The Catholic faith knows that we are not the ones to dictate the conditions for priestly ministry and that behind being a priest there is always the will and the call of Christ," he said. The Vatican strongly and formally teaches that the church cannot change the male-only priesthood because Christ chose only men to be his apostles.

The Vatican newspaper said it interviewed Muller in his office, but it also asked him how it was that Pope Benedict not only chose him, but decided to give him the apartment where he had lived as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and where he still keeps many of his books.

Muller, 64, said he would define the 85-year-old pope as "a paternal friend, since he's older than I am by a

generation."

He said his job in Rome will be "to relieve part of his work and not bring him problems that can be resolved" at the level of the congregation. "The Holy Father has the important mission of proclaiming the Gospel and confirming his brothers and sisters in the faith. It's up to us to deal with the less pleasant matters so that he will not be burdened with too many things, although, naturally, he always will be informed of important matters."

Muller said he knows the problems and challenges facing the church are serious, including "the problem of groups -- of the so-called right or left -- that occupy much of our time and attention."

However, he said, a bigger danger is losing sight of "our principal task, which is to proclaim the Gospel and explain in a concrete way the doctrine of the church."

The newspaper also asked Muller about his annual trips to Peru and his friendship with the liberation theologian Dominican Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, with whom he wrote a book. In the 1990s, the doctrinal congregation had asked the Dominican to write and rewrite articles clarifying some of his theological and pastoral positions.

The archbishop said he was invited to participate in a seminar with Gutierrez in 1988, and he went "with some reservations" because the doctrinal congregation had criticized aspects of liberation theology that it said were too influenced by Marxist ideology.

"One must distinguish between an erroneous and a correct liberation theology," Muller told the newspaper. "I maintain that a good theology is involved with the freedom and glory of the children of God."

While a Catholic must reject Marxist ideas and analysis, he said, "we must ask ourselves sincerely: How can we speak about the love and mercy of God in the face of the suffering of so many people who do not have food, water, medical care; who don't know how to give their own children a future; where human dignity really is lacking; where human rights are ignored by the powerful?"

The archbishop said that for the past 15 years he has spent a month or two each year in Peru or other parts of Latin America, living simply and getting to know people.

In his travels, he said, "this is what I've experienced: You can be at home anywhere. Where there is an altar, Christ is present. Wherever you are, you are part of God's big family."

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