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Overseeing bishop: LCWR 'not in accordance' with church

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One of the three bishops appointed to oversee the group which represents the majority of U.S. women religious took a hard line Wednesday towards the Vatican?s criticism of the organization, saying the sisters are ?promoting, unilaterally?a new kind of theology that is not in accordance with the faith of the church.?

Toledo, Ohio, Bishop Leonard Blair, who was appointed with Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain and Springfield, Ill., Bishop Thomas Paprocki in April to oversee the Leadership Conference of Women Religious made the comments Wednesday during an extended interview on the popular public radio program ?Fresh Air.?

His interview comes a week after LCWR?s president, Sr. Pat Farrell, also appeared on the program, saying that a key question facing the faithful today is "Can you be Catholic and have a questioning mind?"

At points during the interview Wednesday, National Public Radio host Terry Gross played back some of Farrell?s responses from her interview on the show July 17 [1], when the LCWR president directly addressed the Vatican's condemnation of her organization, which represents some 80 percent of women religious in the U.S.

In a document known as a "doctrinal assessment," first released April 18, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said there was a "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" in the group's programs and ordered it to revise and place itself under the authority of three bishops.

After hearing Farrell?s response from last week to the Vatican?s criticism that LCWR doesn?t focus enough on speaking against abortion, in which the sister said she thought the criticism was ?unfair? because the group works on a range of pro-life issues, Blair said Farrell?s answer left him with ?great disappointment.?

?No one is questioning the fact that many sisters? are involved in those issues, said Blair. But, quoting Blessed Pope John Paul II, the bishop said that ?all other human rights are false and illusory if the right to life?is not defended with maximum determination.?

?One would expect the LCWR to stand up and be counted in upholding this right and working for its defense,? said Blair. ?There?s been nothing really said by the leadership conference on this issue.?

At one point during the interview, Blair also specifically mentioned LCWR?s lack of statements regarding opposition to gay marriage, saying that ?the defense of the God given institution of marriage as between one man and one woman? is a ?great issue of our society today.?

?I think Catholics would reasonably espect a leadership group of women religious would subscribe to that and want to be part of that effort,? Blair continued.

Asked whether he and the other bishops involved in LCWR?s revision are open to dialogue with the group

about the mandate, Blair said that would depend on the sisters? definition of dialogue.

?If by dialogue, they mean that the doctrines of the church are negotiable, and that the bishops represent one position and the LCWR represents another position and somehow we find a middle ground about basic church teaching on faith and morals, then no, I don't think that's the dialogue that the Holy See would envision,? said Blair.

?But if it's a dialogue about how to have the LCWR really educate and help the sisters appreciate and accept church teaching and to implement it in their discussions, and try to heal some of the questions or concerns they have about these issues, then that would be the dialogue.?

Continuing, Blair said that the ?fundamental faith? of the Catholic church is that there ?objective truths?that really do come from revelation and are interpreted authentically through the teaching office of the church?and are expected to believed.?

?Those are things that are not negotiable,? said Blair, adding that LCWR is ?promoting unilaterally new understandings and a new kind of theology that is not in accordance with the faith of the church.?

Ending Wednesday?s interview by saying that the bishops ?want to do this [oversight of LCWR] collaboratively,? Blair also said that until this point there?s been ?a refusal? from LCWR ?to recognize that there are any problems.?

?If someone will not even acknowledge that this is a problem, then that of course that creates a great difficulty,? said the bishop.

Blair, who has been the bishop of the Toldeo diocese since 2003, also undertook the "doctrinal assessment" of LCWR for the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which led to the sisters? group?s ordered revision.

UPDATE: For full audio of Toledo, Ohio, Bishop Leonard Blair's interview on National Public Radio Wednesday, use the player below. For a partial transcript of his remarks, head over to NPR [2].

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/31330
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