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NY priests express 'support,' 'gratitude' for women religious

Joshua J. McElwee | Jul. 30, 2012 NCR Today

In what appears to be the first public sign of diocesan priests supporting women religious following a harsh Vatican critique of the group that represents the majority of U.S. sisters, the priests of the diocese of Albany, N.Y., have sent a letter to the sisters serving their diocese expressing their ?support? and ?profound gratitude? for the sisters? work.

The letter, which is dated July 16 but first obtained by *NCR* last week, comes from the priestly life and ministry council of the Albany diocese.

In the letter, the priests say they write to the sisters to ?acknowledge with profound gratitude your many contributions to the Albany diocese.? The priests write that sisters have been ?faithful disciples and co-workers in bringing the message of the Gospel to the urban, rural and suburban regions of our Diocese.?

?You are indeed ?signs of contradiction? to the world,? the priests write, ?as you bear witness to the unique value of lives given totally to God in love and expressed in your generous service to all God?s people.?

Speaking in a brief phone interview Monday, Fr. David Berberian, a member of the Albany diocese?s priestly life and ministry council, said the idea to send a letter to the sisters came up at the council?s monthly meeting.

?It came from the suggestion of some priests because they wanted to at least let the sisters know we were supporting them, said Berberian, who is also the administrative advocate for priests for the Albany diocese.

Berberian said copies of the letter were sent to the congregational offices of each of the sisters? congregations which serve in the diocese. One congregation, he said, has already written back, ?just expressing their gratitude? for the note.

In an April 18 order to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which represents some 80 percent of sisters in the U.S., the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ordered that the group revise its statues and programs and place itself under the authority of three bishops.

The Vatican?s move has led to wide speculation about what moves the sisters? group will make in response. The sisters? group is set to gather for its annual assembly Aug. 7 in St. Louis.

Last week, Toledo, Ohio, Bishop Leonard Blair, one of the three bishops appointed to oversee LCWR, seemed to indicate he would be taking a hard line with the group [1].

Speaking in an interview on the National Public Radio program ?Fresh Air,? Blair said LCWR is ?promoting, unilaterally...a new kind of theology that is not in accordance with the faith of the church.?

For their part, LCWR leaders have indicated a desire to dialogue with Vatican leaders regarding their concerns with LCWR.

Addressing the situation facing the LCWR directly, the Albany priests conclude their letter:

?We pray for a successful outcome of the mutual dialogue that will occur between your leadership, the Bishops and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. We are confident that this conversation will provide a much needed example to the wider world of respectfulness and civility, as it embodies a degree of mutuality, trust and honesty, often absent in today?s world.

?Please be assured of our on-going support, prayers and immense gratitude for your lived example of the following of Christ in our times.?

The letter from the Albany diocese follows a number of other letters from U.S. priests and brothers supporting U.S. women religious.

Previously, a province of the international Order of Saint Augustine, seven orders of Franciscans, the Cincinnati province of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, the international office of the Xaverian brothers, and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, LCWR?s counterpart for U.S. men religious, have written similar letters [2].

For a fully copy of the letter from the Albany diocese?s priestly life and ministry council, see below.

Albany Letter [3]

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