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# LCWR president to sisters: Be 'fearless' on Vatican mandate

Joshua J. McElwee | Aug. 10, 2012

**ST. LOUIS** -- Hours before the U.S. Catholic sisters meeting was expected to decide how to respond to the Vatican's rebuke of their leadership organization, the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious told them to be "truthful, but gentle and absolutely fearless."

Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell spoke Friday morning at the annual meeting of LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of 57,000 Catholic sisters in the U.S.

As LCWR's president, Farrell has been chiefly responsible for handling the Vatican's rebuke, which came in an April 18 mandate ordering the group to revise and place itself under the control of three U.S. bishops.

Taking the stage to a standing ovation, Farrell said that "some larger movement in the church ... has landed on LCWR."

A key question facing LCWR, she said, is, "What would a prophetic response to the doctrinal assessment look like?"

"I think it would be humble, but not submissive," she continued. "Rooted in a solid sense of ourselves, but not self-righteous; truthful, but gentle and absolutely fearless.

"It would ask probing questions. Are we being invited to some appropriate pruning and are we open to it? Is this doctrinal process an expression of concern or an attempt to control?

"Concern is based in love and invites unity. Control through fear and intimidation would be an abuse of power.

"Does the institutional legitimacy of canonical recognition empower us to live prophetically? Does it allow us the freedom to question with informed consciences? Does it really welcome feedback in a church that claims to honor the *sensus fildeum*?"

Farrell also said it would be a "mistake" to make "too much" of the mandate.

"We cannot allow it to consume us," she said. "It is not the first time that a form of religious life has collided with the church, nor will it be the last."

"The doctrinal assessment suggests that we are not currently living in an ideal ecclesial world," Farrell continued.

Yet, she said, the sisters also "cannot make too little" of the Vatican's move. Its impact, she said, is "apparent to all of us."

Ending her remarks with a reflection on the Gospel parable of the mustard seed, Farrell showed an image of mustard plants growing in a field, saying the seed is "uncontainable" and "crops up anywhere without

permission."

Comparing the seed to the spirit of God, she continued: "We can indeed live in joyful hope because there is no political or ecclesiastical herbicide that can wipe out the newness of God's spirit."

Ending with a Spanish phrase she said she learned while ministering in Chile during the country's military dictatorship, Farrell said: "They can crush a few flowers, but they cannot hold back the springtime."

As Farrell left the stage, the audience of about 900 stood slowly, clapping for about three minutes and shouting in affirmation.

Before Farrell's address, LCWR announced that St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn had been elected Thursday to be the group's new president-elect.

In LCWR's model, three sisters -- a president, president-elect and past-president -- govern the group collaboratively with the group's secretary, treasurer and executive director.

The group's membership chooses a president-elect at each year's assembly. Following a year in the position, she automatically succeeds to the presidency, then to the position of past-president the following year.

During a formal ceremony set for Friday afternoon, Farrell will move to the position of past president, while Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, currently LCWR's president-elect, will become its president.

Zinn, who serves on the leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Penn., previously served as the representative of the international Congregation of St. Joseph Sisters at the UN, which enjoys consultative status as a nongovernmental organization there.

A copy of Farrell's presidential address **is here as pdf document** [1].

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