

LCWR will continue dialogue, but not compromise mission

Joshua J. McElwee | Aug. 10, 2012

ST. LOUIS -- The organization which represents the majority of U.S. Catholic sisters said Friday afternoon it would continue discussions with church officials regarding a Vatican-ordered takeover, but "will reconsider" if it "is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission."

The statement by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents some 80 percent of U.S. sisters, came at the end of the group's annual assembly, held this week in St. Louis.

The sisters were responding to an April 18 mandate by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that ordered the group to revise and place itself under the authority of three U.S. bishops.

Reading aloud from a prepared statement, which came after approval from the 900 sisters gathered at the assembly, LCWR's president, Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, said LCWR membership wanted to use the occasion of the Vatican order "to explain to church leaders LCWR's mission, values and operating principles."

As part of the Vatican's mandate, LCWR has been ordered to place itself under the authority of an "archbishop delegate," Seattle's Archbishop Peter Sartain.

LCWR national board is expected to meet with Sartain in St. Louis Saturday, Aug. 11, for about two hours. The focus of that meeting "will be on beginning to process with him and see how that unfolds," Farrell said at a press conference.

The LCWR expect "open and honest dialogue" with Sartain that "may lead not only to increasing understanding between the church leadership and women religious, but also to creating more possibilities for the laity and, particularly for women, to have a voice in the church," the statement said.

"Religious life, as it is lived by the women religious who comprise LCWR, is an authentic expression of this life that must not be compromised," it said.

"The assembly instructed the LCWR officers to conduct their conversation with Archbishop Sartain from a stance of deep prayer that values mutual respect, careful listening and open dialogue," the statement said. "The officers will proceed with these discussions as long as possible, but will reconsider if LCWR is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission."

The statement was approved by a wide majority of the membership, two members of the group told *NCR*.

Over the past week, LCWR members have been meeting in closed-door "executive sessions" during the assembly to discuss the mandate. Members were asked to keep those discussions confidential.

At the last executive session, held Friday afternoon, "99.9 percent" of the members present stood and clapped in approval when a final draft of the release was read aloud, said Sr. Nancy Corcoran, a member of the Sisters of

St. Joseph of Carondelet of St. Louis who represents her order as an LCWR member.

"People were thrilled," said Corcoran. "You could have heard the hooting and the cheering and the yelling. It makes me proud. It was worth all the time and effort."

In their statement, the LCWR members also reference the wide support the group has received from lay people, seen in vigils hosted in cities across the country this week.

LCWR members, the statement reads, recognize that many lay people had urged the group to help "reconcile the differences that exist within the Catholic church" and create "spaces for honest and open conversation on the critical moral and ethical questions that face the global community."

LCWR's members also urged their officers "not to allow the work with CDF to absorb the time, energy and resources of the conference nor to let it distract the conference from the work its mission requires," reads the statement.

Speaking at the press conference Friday, Farrell said that while the process of approval of the statement didn't involve "voting as such," the statement "had a high level of approval by the members."

In order to get a sense of how each of the some 900 gathered felt regarding parts of the statement, one member told *NCR* following the press conference, the assembly used different colored cards to allow members to express support or disapproval.

When the final draft was read aloud at Friday's afternoon executive session, said Benedictine Sr. Anne Sheperd, the group gave a "lasting standing ovation" to the final draft.

Asked what she hopes to receive in dialogue with Sartain, Farrell said LCWR wants "to be recognized and be understood as equal in the church."

"And really we do want to come to the point of having an environment " for the entire Catholic church to search for truth together, to talk about issues that are very complicated. And there is not the environment right now."

The Vatican's critique of LCWR said the Vatican congregation identified a "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" in the group's programs and "corporate dissent" in the group regarding the church's sexual teachings.

Farrell said during questioning from the press that "dialogue on doctrine is not going to be our starting point."

"Our starting point will be about our own life and about our understanding of religious life," Farrell continued. "And the documents, in our view, misrepresent that."

Following the issuing of the LCWR's statement Friday, the group is to host a Mass at which the annual transition of the group's top leaders will occur. LCWR's leadership is composed of a president-elect, president and past president, who govern group collaboratively with the group's secretary, treasurer and executive director.

At the ceremony, Farrell will move to the position of past president, while Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, currently LCWR's president-elect, will become its president.

Asked if that change in leadership would affect their dialogue with Sartain, Farrell said the process of having three sisters working together in leadership allows for "continuity."

"But there is change over and that really speaks to who we are and how we share leadership," Farrell continued.

?It really speaks to who we are.?

Deacon, who is also the congregational leader of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi based in St. Francis, Wis., previously served at the United Nations as director of the New York office of Franciscans International, a nongovernmental organization that lobbies for justice issues.

Before LCWR's announcement of its statement Friday, three past presidents of the organization were part of a press briefing in which they explained some of the process that eventually led to the statement, and what would happen following its release.

Sr. Helen Garvey said at the briefing, the LCWR national board will meet to discuss the statement in more detail before meeting with Sartain for two hours on Saturday Aug. 11.

Asked at the briefing how LCWR was handling the logistics of coming to a single decision among the some 900 members attending the gathering, Garvey, who served as LCWR president in 1987, said that the process was ?not much different from what we do in our congregations.?

A typical flow to the executive sessions, said Garvey, saw LCWR's leadership explain some of the questions before the group, allow individual tables to discuss the matters among themselves, have time for representative from those tables to talk to the entire group, and then allow facilitators to gather the thoughts together.

?Sometimes the Holy Spirit just speaks to us in a very un-programmed and unprocessed way,? said Garvey, an organizational consultant for religious congregations who also serves on NCR's board.

Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck, a member of the community of Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, said in the briefing that while the 900-member group did not take a vote on every issue, they did make sure to hear ?from the entire group ? what is surfacing about the thinking of the sisters from the group.?

?It's easy to see whether or not we are coming to consensus,? said Weisenbeck, who served as LCWR president in 2010. ?It is very clear.?

Asked at the Friday morning press conference about whether LCWR members felt empowered to make decisions regarding the mandate on behalf of their entire communities, Weisenbeck said that generally LCWR members feel a spirit from their congregational members that they can ?do what they need to do.?

As an example, Weisenbeck said that before leaving to represent her congregation at an LCWR assembly years ago her congregational members presented her with a bouquet of roses.

?I understand their trust and their empowerment,? she said.

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Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported the day that the LCWR board met with Archbishop Sartain. They met on Saturday Aug. 11.

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