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# LCWR award-winner: Church must re-evaluate leadership

Joshua J. McElwee | Aug. 14, 2012

**ST. LOUIS** -- Central to the recent tensions between U.S. Catholic sisters and bishops, epitomized in a Vatican critique of the sisters, lie wide-ranging questions about the structure of church leadership today, a prominent sister and theologian told about 900 of her peers Friday.

Accepting the Outstanding Leadership Award from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious on the last day of the group's annual assembly, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders said the issue at the heart of the Vatican's attempted take-over of the group is "what kind of leadership the church needs."

Schneiders said church leaders should consider Jesus' exercise of power when designing their style of leadership.

Jesus, she said, "did not come to exercise coercive power over recalcitrant sinners."

"Jesus never resorted to violence, thought-control or loyalty oaths, intimidation through shaming or threats of rejection, expulsion from the covenant community, execution or eternal damnation," Schneiders said.

"Rather, Jesus taught by world-subverting parables, challenging questions, insistent dialogue, by patient persuasion, repeated invitation, probing argument and especially by his original and arresting interpretations of scripture, which were sometimes startling in their radicality because Jesus favored people and their needs over the requirements of even the most sacred laws," she said.

Most of the four-day meeting of LCWR, held Aug. 7-10 in St. Louis, saw the women discussing an April 18 mandate to LCWR from the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith that ordered the group to reform its statutes and programs and place itself under the authority of three U.S. bishops.

Following a series of meetings, some of which were held in closed-door sessions, LCWR's then-president, Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, announced Friday [1] that the group decided it would continue discussions with church officials regarding the order, but "will reconsider" if it "is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission."

LCWR's national board met with Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the Vatican-appointed "archbishop delegate" who is to oversee the LCWR reform, for about two hours Saturday.

In a statement released to the press Monday, LCWR said during the meeting with Sartain, "they were able to express both their concerns and their feelings about the CDF report with great openness and honesty."

"Archbishop Sartain listened carefully," the statement continues. "The archbishop asked for assistance from LCWR to learn more about the conference and about the members' experience and understandings of religious life. LCWR will provide Archbishop Sartain with resources they believe will be helpful, and its officers plan to meet with him again later in the fall."

In its previous statement Friday, LCWR said its members authorized its officers "to conduct their conversation

with Archbishop Sartain from a stance of deep prayer that values mutual respect, careful listening and open dialogue."

"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 continued.

In her remarks Friday, Schneiders, professor emeritus of theology at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif., and a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Mich., said the Vatican mandate caused "genuine scandal" and was a "staggering assault on LCWR that stunned its leaders and members and shocked many in the larger church and beyond."

Noting that Oct. 11 marks the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Schneiders said the "theological issue at the heart of this struggle" is that of "ecclesial leadership in the context of the theology of Vatican II."

The leadership modeled by Jesus in the Gospel accounts, Schneiders said, shows the church "is not an imitation of any secular model of community," and therefore, its leadership "cannot and must not mimic the exercise of authority of secular power structures."

She said the church is neither a "divine right monarchy," a "one-person, one-vote democracy," an oligarchy, a plutocracy or a republic.

"The church," Schneiders said, "is a unique kind of community, the union of those baptized into Christ, formed by his Word which is not bound -- never fully grasped nor controlled by anyone -- gathered around the table where we see Christ's body in order to become his body for the world."

Schneiders offered three suggestions for what she called "Gospel leadership":

- Gospel leadership involves leaders that "emerge from the community rather than imposing themselves or being imposed on it."

  Schneiders said leaders of religious congregations "represent the best hopes and commitments of the community," referencing several bishops who said after the Vatican's mandate that the Vatican had no problem with individual sisters represented by LCWR, but instead with its leaders.

  "Leaders of religious communities are chosen from the community, for the community, and when they complete their term of service they will not move up to a higher post in a power structure, but will resume their place in the community," she said.

  "They are not called or empowered or sent to dominate or lord it over the community ... but to be the servants of all, even to the laying down of their lives in various ways for those they serve."

- Gospel leadership is "anticipatory leadership," an "active fostering of discernment about what is coming towards us from the future ... to meet those new challenges with the riches of the Gospel tradition but also with the best contemporary resources and communal reflection."
- Gospel leadership chooses to "live with integrity." Those leaders, she said, would "resist and energize the community to resist whatever threatens its integrity, whether such threats come from within or without, whether they are spiritual or societal or ecclesiastical."

  "To incarnate, promote, and above all witness to the freedom of the Gospel in the face of interlocking domination systems, both secular and religious, is a primary task of the Christian community, the Body of

Christ in this world," she continued.

Ultimately, Schneiders said, religious life is generating a form of "Gospel leadership which is increasingly emerging into public view as a genuine alternative to ecclesiastical or secular leadership defined as dominative power."

"This, for me, and I think for people all over this country and beyond, is what LCWR [emulates]," she continued. "This kind of servant leadership in this kind of Gospel community is as baffling to those in power today, as was Jesus' mode of leadership to the temple hierarchy and the Roman Empire of his time."

Schneiders, who has also been awarded the John Courtney Murray Award from the Catholic Theological Society of America, the society's highest honor, is known for her writings on the lives, theology and experience of women religious.

Before receiving the award Friday, the group played a slideshow of photos of Schneiders through the years as LCWR members detailed her life and work.

Following the Second Vatican Council, the presentation explained, Schneiders was one of 10 sisters in her community sent by its then-provincial, Sr. Margaret Brennan, to receive higher degrees in theology.

Schneiders first attended the Institut Catholique de Paris in the 1960s, obtaining her sacred theology licentiate, before becoming one of the first two women to concurrently graduate with a sacred theology doctorate from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

The LCWR's Outstanding Leadership Award is the group's highest honor and, according to its website, is given to people who, among other things, demonstrate "faithfulness to gospel values and mission" and have made a significant contribution "particularly to women religious congregations in the United States."

Among previous honorees are Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, the CEO of the Catholic Health Association of the United States; Brennan, one of LCWR's first presidents; and the late Loretto Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, one of only a few women permitted to take part in the sessions of the Second Vatican Council.

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For the full text of Sr. Sandra Schneiders address, as provided by LCWR, **click here** **[2]**.

Previous reports from *NCR* on the LCWR assembly:

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- **LCWR president to sisters: Be 'fearless' on Vatican mandate** [3], Aug. 10
- **Sisters contemplate surrender, discernment, authority** [4], Aug. 10
- **Sister, NCR contributors discuss religious life with LCWR** [5], Aug. 10
- **Keynote: LCWR 'seed bed' for 21st century** [6], Aug. 8
- **LCWR 'gathers collective wisdom' of members to discern next steps** [7], Aug. 8
- **LCWR past presidents reflect on Vatican mandate** [8], Aug. 7
- **LCWR to determine course at next week's annual meeting** [9], July 31

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