

LCWR: Meeting with Vatican overseer involved 'careful' listening

Joshua J. McElwee | Aug. 14, 2012

The organization that represents the majority of U.S. Catholic sisters said Monday that both an expression of concerns and an exchange of resources were discussed at the group's first meeting with the bishop appointed by the Vatican to oversee its work.

Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain "listened carefully" during a meeting Saturday with the board members of the Leadership Conference Women Religious, the conference said in a press release.

The meeting, the first formal session held between LCWR leaders and Sartain, had been widely anticipated. In a move that has attracted attention from the media and an array of Catholics, Sartain and two other U.S. bishops were appointed April 18 by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to oversee LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of U.S. Catholic sisters.

Outlining Sartain's role in a critical document called a "doctrinal assessment," the Vatican congregation said that, among other things, a number of the sisters' group's programs and plans contained a "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith."

Saturday's meeting between members of the LCWR board and Sartain took place in St. Louis, where about 900 of the 1,500 members of the sisters' group, which represents various orders of U.S. Catholic sisters, held their annual assembly Aug. 7-10.

Among other events, the assembly saw days of closed-door discussions among the members present about how they would respond to the Vatican's criticism of their group.

Following those discussions, the group announced Friday that while it would try to continue dialogue with church officials regarding the Vatican's criticisms, it "will reconsider" if it "is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission."

In its statement Monday, LCWR said its members "were able to express both their concerns and their feelings about the CDF report with great openness and honesty" during the meeting with Sartain, whom the Vatican appointed "archbishop delegate" of the sisters' group and gave wide-ranging authority to revise its statutes and review its plans and programs.

During the meeting, "Archbishop Sartain listened carefully," the statement says.

"The archbishop asked for assistance from LCWR to learn more about the conference and about the members' experience and understandings of religious life," the statement continues. "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."

A spokesperson for the Seattle archdiocese said Tuesday that Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, the communications director for the U.S. bishops' conference, is handling Sartain's public comments on the matter.

In a separate call, Walsh said Sartain "made a commitment to LCWR leaders that he would communicate with them directly and not through the media and he intends to keep that commitment."

In its statement Friday concerning how it would pursue discussions with Sartain, LCWR said it expects "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."

"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," LCWR's statement read.

"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 officers will proceed with these discussions as long as possible, but will reconsider if LCWR is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission."

Here is LCWR's full statement about its meeting with Sartain:

Statement of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious Following August 11 Meeting with Archbishop J. Peter Sartain

[**St. Louis, MO**] On August 11, Archbishop J. Peter Sartain met for the first time with the national board of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The LCWR board members believe they were able to express both their concerns and their feelings about the CDF report with great openness and honesty, and that Archbishop Sartain listened carefully. 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.

The LCWR assembly, which closed the day before the board met with Archbishop Sartain, had charged the board to conduct their conversation with the archbishop from a stance of mutual respect, careful listening and open dialogue. The expectation of the LCWR members is that open and honest dialogue 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. Furthermore, the assembly instructed the board to articulate its belief that 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.

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