NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Sisters embrace solidarity of purpose and vision

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 30, 2012

OPINION

We need to remind ourselves that while our bishops and women religious share the same faith and best wishes for our church, it could take months, or longer, to work out their differences, which involve varied understandings of authority and conscience, gender issues, and the meaning of religious life today.

It was April 18, after a four-year study, that the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith mandated a U.S. archbishop to provide "review, guidance and approval, where necessary," of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an umbrella organization representing 80 percent of our nation's 57,000 women religious.

An eight-page "doctrinal assessment" found LCWR to be dissenting on women priests, homosexuality and abortion. It charged that LCWR had allowed dangerous, faith-undermining "radical feminist themes" to slip into its programs.

LCWR was caught off-guard by the abruptness of the announcement, which followed only by minutes a meeting the LCWR leadership team had had with Vatican officials.

The assessment -- both the content and means by which it became public -- sent shock waves through women religious congregations, communities still licking wounds from a four-year apostolic investigation into virtually every aspect of their lives.

For the tens of thousands of U.S. women religious who have given their entire adult lives to the church, the Vatican investigations have been, at the very least, discouraging. Some see them as harmful to the future of religious life itself.

Seeds of division date back some 50 years. Today's U.S. women religious are one of the most visible outgrowths of the church reforms spawned by the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s, reforms mandated by the council. On the other hand, many of today's most influential bishops appear dedicated to denying that council -- or those reform directives -- ever took place.

Ironically, Vatican II was intended to bring Catholicism into the modern world just as that world was entering a postmodern era. The second half of the 20th century witnessed huge upheavals in the human imagination. Mind-altering photos of Earth from space and others of distant galaxies sparked thoughts of a planet without boundaries and a solar system suspended in endless space.

Science forced seemingly endless questions, vying anew for control of the human mind. Where was God? Where was faith?

To live in the 20th and 21st centuries has meant nothing less than to question old understandings. Premodern ideas, including exclusive male authority structures, came under attack. Many were to give way before newly

educated women.

After decades of such worldwide cultural upheavals, not to see the dysfunctional nature of an all-male investigation of an all-female organization and that investigation's equally dysfunctional findings is to be shockingly disconnected with reality. Add to this the order that three men guide and approve, where necessary, a national women's organization and you end up in tears or laughter.

Fortunately, the women are likely to be kind.

The journey from the April mandate to August assembly was notable.

Inside the communities there was at first disbelief and anger. For weeks, the women mixed prayer, contemplation and discussions. As one religious said, "The anger eventually dissipated. Out of the gatherings came better self-identity and greater purpose."

What the women would learn as they gathered in St. Louis Aug. 7-9 for the annual LCWR meeting is that they had arrived with common convictions. Like the characters in the 1977 Steven Spielberg classic, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," they came with outlines etched in their collective imaginations.

During executive sessions, they shared thoughts, concluded the assessment had not been truthful to their experiences as women religious. This was a big step. They further went on to agree to dialogue with the Vatican-appointed bishops, headed by Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain -- the first priority to explain religious life today.

The dialogue will continue as long as LCWR is not forced "to compromise the integrity of its mission."

As they saw it, they had been liberated and imprisoned by the Gospels they had attempted to live for decades. They had come to realize they cannot be other than the women they had come to be, products of community life shaped by service.

The women who gathered in St. Louis had an air of competence and confidence as they moved from meeting room to assembly hall, from quick lunches in the hallway to a banquet the final night. After all, they were quite possibly the most educated, experienced, multicultural, theologically and politically versed Catholic women to assemble in history.

Departing St. Louis they exuded a solidarity of purpose and vision few might have dared to imagine just weeks earlier. They had not asked for the spotlight. Once in it, they decided it was time to preach to the gathered media from throughout the country their distinctly feminine and hopeful view of church: a pastoral, inclusive, forward-looking vision, responsive to the needs of the time.

How some bishops will receive this vision will determine where these women go next.

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