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Pope Francis reaffirms critique of LCWR, plan for reform

by Joshua J. McElwee

Pope Francis has reaffirmed Pope Benedict XVI's rebuke of the main leadership group of U.S. Catholic sisters and approved a plan to place the group under the control of three U.S. bishops, according to the Vatican.

Reaffirmation of the move came in a meeting Monday between the leaders of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller, the head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, according to a statement from the Vatican.

During the meeting, the Vatican said, Müller told the LCWR leaders that he had "recently discussed" the issue with Pope Francis, "who reaffirmed the findings of the Assessment and the program of reform."

The meeting was the first between LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of the United States' approximately 57,000 sisters, and Müller, who became head of the doctrinal congregation in July.

LCWR confirmed that its leadership met with Vatican officials in a statement Monday and said the conversation was "open and frank."

"We pray that these conversations may bear fruit for the good of the Church," the statement concluded.

In April 2012, the doctrinal congregation criticized the sisters' group, releasing a statement that LCWR's work contained "themes incompatible with the Catholic faith." The move spurred nationwide protests of support for the sisters.

The findings concluded a three-year investigation of the group, formally known as a "doctrinal

assessment," launched by the congregation's previous head and former San Francisco archbishop Cardinal William Levada.

The congregation placed the group under the control of Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, who was given a five-year mandate to oversee reforms as its archbishop-delegate.

LCWR said in June the congregation's criticisms were based on unsubstantiated accusations, came from a flawed process and caused "scandal and pain throughout the church."

News of the meeting Monday came in five paragraphs in the Vatican's daily press bulletin, which said Müller, LCWR's leadership and Sartain were in the meeting.

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Before reaffirming the doctrinal congregation's critique, the release said, Müller "expressed his gratitude for the great contribution of women Religious to the Church in the United States."

Müller also "highlighted" teachings of the Second Vatican Council promoting "a vision of ecclesial communion founded on faith in Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Church as faithfully taught through the ages under the guidance of the Magisterium," the release states.

Müller "also emphasized that a Conference of Major Superiors, such as the LCWR, exists in order to promote common efforts among its member Institutes as well as cooperation with the local Conference of Bishops and with individual Bishops," the release said. "For this reason, such Conferences are constituted by and remain under the direction of the Holy See."

Notice of Monday's meeting could reawaken a divide between members of the Vatican bureaucracy over how to handle the sisters' group.

While the doctrinal congregation may be taking a hard-line approach, the Vatican congregation responsible for overseeing the work of religious orders around the world recently has taken a more sensitive tack, even indicating it sought dialogue with the sisters.

The April 6 appointment of Franciscan Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo as the second-in-command of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Pope Francis' first appointment to the Vatican bureaucracy, seemed to approve the softer approach: Rodríguez's colleagues said he is someone who seeks collaboration rather than conflict.

The religious congregation previously launched a separate investigation of U.S. sisters in 2009. Known as an "apostolic visitation," it examined individual orders of U.S. Catholic sisters. That investigation began under Cardinal Franc Rodé, the religious congregation's former leader. Brazilian Cardinal João Braz de Aviz replaced Rodé in 2011.

The last official statement from any party regarding the LCWR revision came after a Nov. 11 meeting between four LCWR leaders and the three U.S. bishops.

As part of Sartain's mandate of revision for the group, he has power over five areas, including review of its "plans and programs," which could affect LCWR's annual assembly in August.

Sartain's powers include:

- revising LCWR statutes;
- creating new programs for the organization;
- reviewing and offering guidance on the application of liturgical texts; and
- reviewing LCWR's affiliations with other organizations, including the political lobby group NETWORK and the Resource Center for Religious Institutes.

LCWR has already announced some plans for its August assembly, including the presentation of an award to Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, the group's immediate past president who was its leader during release of the Vatican critique in April 2012 and who helped steer the group's response.

When contacted April 4 about Farrell's award, a representative for Sartain said the archbishop was "currently unavailable for comment" on the matter or on his involvement in the sisters' group's planning or giving of awards.

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Here is the complete statement from the Vatican Information Service:

Meeting of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Vatican City, 15 April 2013 (VIS) -- "Today, the Superiors of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith met with the Presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) of the United States of America. Archbishop James Peter Sartain, archbishop of Seattle, Washington, USA, and the Holy See's Delegate for the Doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR, also participated in the meeting," informs a communique from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"As this was his first opportunity to meet with the Presidency of the LCWR, the Prefect of the Congregation, Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Muller, expressed his gratitude for the great contribution of women Religious to the Church in the United States as seen particularly in the many schools, hospitals, and institutions of support for the poor which have been founded and staffed by Religious over the years."

"The Prefect then highlighted the teaching of the Second Vatican Council regarding the important mission of Religious to promote a vision of ecclesial communion founded on faith in Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Church as faithfully taught through the ages under the guidance of the Magisterium. He also emphasized that a Conference of Major Superiors, such as the LCWR, exists in order to promote common efforts among its member Institutes as well as cooperation with the local Conference of Bishops and with individual Bishops. For this reason, such Conferences are constituted by and remain under the direction of the Holy See."

"Finally, Archbishop Muller informed the Presidency that he had recently discussed the Doctrinal Assessment with Pope Francis, who reaffirmed the findings of the Assessment and the program of reform for this Conference of Major Superiors."

"It is the sincere desire of the Holy See," the note concludes, "that this meeting may help to promote the integral witness of women Religious, based on a firm foundation of faith and Christian love, so as to preserve and strengthen it for the enrichment of the Church and society for generations to come."

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