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

Pope Francis' LCWR reaffirmation leads sisters to hard questions

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 17, 2013

Within hours of the Vatican's announcement Monday [1] that Pope Francis had reaffirmed a controversial takeover of the primary group of U.S. Catholic sisters, reactions from prominent American sisters ranged from "wait and see" to the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

It may be too early to tell what the news means for the country's 57,000 Catholic sisters, said several former leaders of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Others said it could signal it is time to reconsider their energy in trying to tamp down potential tensions with bishops.

"LCWR has spent an enormous amount of energy in conversations and in preparation materials and in actual meetings" with Vatican prelates, Mercy Sr. Helen Marie Burns, a former LCWR president, said. "The question becomes, How fruitful is the continued use of that energy for the church as well as for the LCWR organization?"

"It's a question of limited energy and what's the best use of that energy in the present moment," said Burns, who served in LCWR's presidency from 1988 to 1990.

The Vatican announced Monday that LCWR leaders had met that day with Archbishop Gerhard Müller, the head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

During the meeting, the Vatican said Müller told the sisters' leaders he had "recently discussed" with Pope Francis his congregation's April 2012 order that the group revise and place itself under the authority of three U.S. bishops.

The pope "reaffirmed the findings of the Assessment and the program of reform," the Vatican said Müller told the sisters.

That mandated reform, announced after a three-year investigation of the group launched by the congregation's previous head and former San Francisco archbishop Cardinal William Levada, has attracted wide attention and spurred nationwide protests of support for the sisters last year.

The congregation placed the sisters' group [2] under the control of Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, who was a given a five-year mandate to oversee reforms as its archbishop-delegate. Sartain was also present for Monday's meeting.

Announcement of Francis' reaffirmation of the move disappointed some.

"Nothing has changed," said Margaret Thompson, a professor of history and women's studies at Syracuse University in New York and an associate of the Monroe, Mich., Immaculate Heart of Mary community.

"We were hoping, some of us, that Pope Francis would be very, very different from Pope Benedict," Thompson said. "For us to expect anything radically different was probably wishful thinking."

Sr. Mary Ann Hinsdale, a theologian at Boston College and member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary community, said she was "very disappointed" with the news and said it may suggest Catholics are still learning how Pope Francis will handle delicate matters.

"All these nice gestures" -- for example, the decisions to wash women's feet on Holy Thursday and to wear more basic liturgical vestments -- "don't necessarily say what he thinks theologically or with regard to his understanding of religious in North America," Hinsdale said.

Monday's 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.

Sr. Annmarie Sanders, LCWR's associate director for communications and a member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary community, wrote in an email that the meeting between the group's leaders and the Vatican congregation was one of many set up by the group "several months ago" as part of an annual visit to Vatican dicasteries.

In a brief statement Monday [3], LCWR said the conversation between the groups during the meeting was "open and frank" and added: "We pray that these conversations may bear fruit for the good of the Church."

Mercy Sr. Patricia McDermott, who as president of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas leads one of the largest groups of Catholic sisters in the western hemisphere, wrote in an email to *NCR* that she had hope for those conversations.

"What is public is only the first glimpse of the conversations that occurred," wrote McDermott, whose organization represents approximately 4,000 sisters serving in the United States and 11 other countries.

"And while it is painful to hear the announcement, we continue to hope for greater understanding of one another's perspectives on religious life as we live this life in the United States today."

Several of the sisters noted that the Vatican's statement said the pope discussed the matter with Müller but did not mention direct communication with the sisters' group.

"I would hope that the pope actually would speak directly to the officers of LCWR," said Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Nancy Sylvester, who served in the group's presidency from 1998 to 2000.

Burns, however, said Monday's statement renewed "feelings of frustration and anger" that many of the reasons given in April 2012 for LCWR's takeover were unsubstantiated.

Current LCWR leadership has repeatedly made the same claim, pointing to inconsistencies in the doctrinal congregation's document [4] that gave Sartain authority over the group, including quotations from speeches at the group's assemblies the sisters say misrepresent the authors' viewpoints.

The assessment, LCWR said in June 2012 [5], "was based on unsubstantiated accusations and the result of a flawed process that lacked transparency."

The doctrinal congregation's leaders, Burns said, "keep reaffirming data that has been identified by LCWR as unsubstantiated. And yet the conversations continue to move from that data rather than a new place of more common understanding."

After considering the Vatican order at its annual assembly in August, about 900 LCWR members approved a resolution [6] saying the group would continue discussions with church officials on the matter but "will

reconsider" if it "is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission."

Burns referred to that August statement, asking how the sisters' group could maintain its integrity while following the mandate.

"This challenges how that's going to be possible," she said. Monday's Vatican statement, she said, "suggests ... that the mandate will be implemented.

"And then LCWR is under the reformation of the three bishops. That doesn't seem to me a way toward the continued integrity of LCWR and its mission."

Another question Burns posed is what kind of dialogue is now possible between the bishops and the sisters. Quoting from Pope Paul VI's 1964 encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* *[7]*, which describes dialogue partially as the "discovery of elements of truth in the opinion of others," she said she wondered if the two groups might be at a conversational impasse.

Paul VI, she said, "spoke of dialogue being ... about people sitting down with openness and a possibility of changing their own viewpoint." For some bishops, she said, dialogue seems to mean "sitting down and talking through their understanding of the truth in a way that then they expect will enlighten the hearer so there can be agreement."

"It's a whole different concept of dialogue," she said. "I do think, perhaps, that's creating the impasse. Is the conversation on the part of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith open to change? It would appear not."

Beyond questions of dialogue, Thompson said more basic questions of application could determine LCWR's future.

"Policy is also how it's implemented," she said, referring to the April 2012 order that gave Sartain wide-ranging powers over the group.

"We know what authority Sartain has been given," she said. "But we don't know how he's going to exercise it now."

"There's a whole lot that we just don't know," Thompson said.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is **jmcelwee@ncronline.org** **[8]**. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac [9].]

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