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LCWR: Simply a group of 'leftist' nuns?

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

Katharine Whitemore is a freelance writer who frequently reviews books for the *Boston Globe*, among other publications. She is bright and insightful. Over the weekend she reviewed a number of books on Pope Francis and his young papacy. Once again she captures the flavor of Francis and some of the challenges he faces. I think she does impressive work.

All this allows me to say that in the process of writing about Francis she offers her readers a throw away paragraph that is hurtful and seemingly dismissive of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and by extension, the U.S. women religious.

Referring to Pope Francis, she writes: "He's no liberation theologian, though. And he's just endorsed the censure (begun by Pope Benedict XVI) of the leftist group of US nuns known as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Then again, he sure can sound like a lefty: "We are tired of systems that produce poor people so that then the Church can support them."?"

But is LCWR properly described simply as a "leftist group of US nuns"? Is this the impression we are to be left with after decades of its work? Is this what LCWR means to the church and wider US society?

What has caused this simplistic impression?

First, LCWR is "leftist" only if you think the word connotes a gospel-based, caring and intelligent organization. Now some might think it is precisely what "leftist" means. But I suspect this is not the context Whitemore is offering in her use of the word as an adjective.

Maybe Whitemore meant "leftist" as a compliment. If so, I take this back. But as written, her adjective comes across as dismissive, even a tad condescending. It seems Whitemore has fallen into a perception

trap set by Vatican prelates who have served LCWR a huge injustice.

LCWR is a networking organization of elected leaders of women U.S. religious congregations. As such, it is the head to the body of the U.S. women religious. Nothing less; nothing more.

NCR readers know the story of the secretive Vatican doctrinal investigation that has painted LCWR as a renegade organization, which it is not. The Vatican "probe" found LCWR guilty of highly exaggerated, misleading, ?doctrinal? lapses of fidelity, charges, which are nothing less than slanderous. A charge of "radical feminism" says more about the indictors than it does about the objects of the accusation.

That the Vatican infidelity findings came out of the work of a small group of men who acted as prosecutors and judges behind closed doors without allowing the women a defense to the specifics is an outrage, one deeply hurtful to the mission of the church.

Pope Francis has an opportunity to right this terrible wrong. it might not be too late. But first he needs to sit down with the LCWR leadership and other women religious from the United States to hear their stories of faith and their perceptions of LCWR and the process that led to the Vatican muggings.

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He will have an opening later this week when women religious leaders from around the world gather in Rome for a once every three-year meeting.

Meanwhile, don't stop reading the works of Whittemore. She obviously works hard and is a fine reviewer of books. No doubt, she will at some time review some of the fine books being written about the work of women religious today.

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