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Global sisters' leader: Dialogue with Vatican is key

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 6, 2013
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Attempts by the main representative group of U.S. Catholic sisters to pursue dialogue with Vatican officials could help strengthen relations between the Vatican and sisters around the world, an elected leader of some 600,000 nuns and sisters said Sunday.

If the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) can effectively dialogue with the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said Franciscan Sr. Mary Lou Wirtz, it "would be wonderful."

Wirtz, the president of the International Union of Superiors General, spoke at the sidelines of the group's triennial assembly, being held in Rome this week.

An American who is also the head of the Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, an international order, Wirtz is concluding a three-year term as UISG president at the conclusion of this year's assembly Tuesday.

The sisters' group is a membership organization for the leaders of the world's individual congregations of women religious. It counts among its ranks more than 1,800 such leaders, estimated to represent some 60 percent of the world's women religious.

About 800 leaders from 76 countries are currently attending the assembly, which is exploring the notion of servant leadership.

Speaking with *NCR* for about 20 minutes, Wirtz focused her comments on the feeling of the sisters at the assembly, how church leaders should understand power and authority, and what the ongoing situation with LCWR might mean for sisters globally.

A leadership organization that represents some 80 percent of about 57,000 U.S. sisters, LCWR was ordered in April 2012 by the Vatican's doctrinal congregation to revise and place itself under the authority of three bishops.

Wirtz's interview was held about three hours before Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, told the UISG assembly Sunday [1] that the way the LCWR order had been handled caused him "much pain."

Following is *NCR*'s full interview with Wirtz, edited only slightly for clarity and context.

***NCR*: We're at this meeting of 800 sisters, from all over the world. What's the general feeling for you? What are you feeling at this moment, at this time, of being with your members?**

Wirtz: I think from the very first moment of our coming together the other day, there was a good energy felt in the group. I think there's really a felt sense of solidarity even though we come from 76 countries, many different

cultures, there's a commonness that bonds us.

And I think it's that that gives us that feeling of solidarity. I think the presentations that we're receiving these days are really drawing us more deeply into 'How do I carry out leadership according to the Gospel?'

That's always what we're striving for, but we can always do better. And I think these days of reflection together, and hearing from religious from different parts of the world, helps us to stretch our own understanding of it.

Maybe I look at it one way, someone else sees it from another view -- and together we expand our own thinking of Gospel leadership.

In that vein of servant leadership, in several of the presentations so far there have been a lot of discussions about power, or authority, or what it means to be obedient. A couple days into the meeting, what's the essence you're taking away from those?

The concept of power of this world, as Jesus refers to it, of our governments and all that, is so often the power of oppression or putting down people or abusing power in many different ways. What we're trying to reflect on is 'What is the good aspect of power?'

And I think Sr. Mary Pat [Mercy Sr. Mary Pat Garvin] in her reflection [2] this morning was showing how when we use power in the right sense, we can influence others and that influence itself is power. We're sometimes afraid as religious to use that word, and yet I think in the very communal way in which we go about our ministries and service, that is a power.

We have the power to influence many, many people -- through what we do and through our service, without us focusing on that as an end in itself, but as through that service.

Do you see the way that sisters here use that power as a model for the church? Do you see that as something implicitly as a model for the bishops?

I think how sisters traditionally have used the sense of power is a model, a model for the church, for anyone -- for the laity. That's why we need to continually look at how do we use our power. Because it is something that others will view, others will see, and it's a model for them also.

Thepresentation[3] on Saturday focused on the biblical story of Esther. There was mention in the question period of the fecundity of women. How does that fit into the model of leadership or power of sisters? Is that different?

I think we as women probably identify with that a little more than maybe our male counterparts. But I think connecting that word with generativity -- that we give life through our service to others, through the life that we pass on to others.

It's a very rich image for us as women in particular: How do we generate and give forth life, even though we do not bear children through our physical presence, but we bear life through what we pass on to others and how we serve others.

Obviously, a big story from this assembly is thespeech[4] by U.S. Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. As an American yourself, how did you see that moment -- the representative of American sisters talking about what is going on with LCWR?

I think it was important because sisters from many parts of the world are watching to see what's happening, with how the LCWR is dealing with this, the prayerful dialogic manner in which they are approaching it.

Because of that, I think it was important that someone from LCWR be here to address what are the facts of what has unfolded -- without judgment, but what are the facts? And where are we today?

Sisters in other parts of the world are wanting to know. And you don't always get the correct information through some of the media. I felt it was very important and I felt Sr. Florence outlined well what has happened.

So some of the importance for you was just to get the facts on the table?

I think so, and for other sisters from other parts of the world to hear what are the facts. And to hear from one of the team themselves how this has unfolded and how the sisters are handling it.

Following Deacon's presentation, Dominican Sr. M. Viviana Ballarin, an Italian who serves as the head of her country's LCWR counterpart, the Union of Major Superiors of Italy, said that her group was expressing solidarity for LCWR. How do you take that feeling?

She was voicing it for the Italian women religious. There was a sense of solidarity from the whole group. I think that was conveyed through the applause and [the facilitator] saying, 'We agree with you. We stand with you.'

I think that was very clear, as it was in the last assembly.

Looking at the LCWR situation, what's the key question facing women religious throughout the world in how LCWR has been treated?

I don't know how to answer what the key question is, but I think for other religious they're watching to see how this is unfolding and how it might impact them in the future. They're very interested in following the situation. I don't know that I could say a key question except that they are interested in seeing how this plays out, because it has implications.

If LCWR can truly open a dialogic stance with CDF for instance and bring clarity because of openness on both sides of the dialogue, I think that would be wonderful. I think that's what they're hoping for.

Would a sense of dialogue help relations between religious and Vatican officials in the future?

I hope so, that we can model what true dialogue is, that we can model that in such a way that it helps those on the other side -- in other words, the Vatican side -- to understand what we mean by dialogue.

That it is a mutual sharing by both sides of information, of whatever is on their minds -- that there can be that kind of mutual openness to hear one another. That isn't always felt at this time.

They're [LCWR] being slow in the process, hoping that through taking the time and patience that the possibility for better dialogue can truly unfold.

Today, Cardinal Braz de Aviz will be with us and there will be time for dialogue. I understand that the sisters have been working on questions.

They submitted questions yesterday, yes.

What are you most hoping for from that?

I think just for the opportunity for the interaction for the sisters here with the cardinal because I find he's very open. And I'm happy to have the opportunity for the sisters to experience that because some come with fixed ideas of how things have been in the past.

I'm hoping too that on the visitation of the U.S. sisters that he'll at least be able to give us update information because that's never been brought to a closure, mainly because staff keep being changed. And so to get an update on that I think will be helpful, especially for the American sisters.

We'll have to see where the dialogue goes, but I'm really happy for this opportunity, that he was so gracious to offer us this much time to dialogue.

And you're just looking for an update on where the visitation is?

Yes. Because none of us know. Because Archbishop Joseph Tobin was transferred and some other positions in the sacred congregation have been open and not filled yet. This has been kind of an in-between time. We don't know where that whole issue of visitation was.

I know Archbishop Tobin was working hard to bring a closure to it, but he wasn't given the time to finish it.

I know that many American sisters said that while they didn't understand the visitation, in the end it led to good dialogue or at least conversation. Is there still that feeling?

I think all of these processes that have come out of Rome have really built a strong sense of solidarity among the women religious in the United States -- because together they have dialogued about and struggled with the questions, which has brought them to a deeper inner struggle.

And also coming to a place of knowing what is ours to do. Through that, the sense of solidarity -- just working this out together.

Your term as UISG president ends soon?

I'm finishing my three year term next week. We have elections on the Thursday and Friday meetings -- so I'll be finishing my three years as president.

From that perspective, this is your last assembly as president. What are you thinking of? What's left on the plate for you? What are things that you would want to pass on to the next leader or consider you didn't get to?

In my three years as president, there have been many significant happenings -- the sexual abuse workshop, theological seminar, the synod -- have been experiences that have stretched me in different ways.

As far as what to pass on, I haven't given too much thought to that yet. I'm kind of waiting to see how things turn out for the elections next week.

We constantly raise among ourselves 'Is there a way that we can do better as a UISG board for assisting the religious of the world?' We struggle with that question, how can we have better influence?

Maybe something will come out of these days yet that will point us in a new direction, and we hope to end with a direction statement that will be guidance for the next board, the next president to carry forth. Some of it is

going to come out of these days.

Is there some issue facing women religious that you thought going into this role you wanted to focus on, but haven't been able to?

One of the issues that we've worked with throughout these years is how can we have better connections with the constellations -- constellations are regional groupings of various sizings and various aspects of influence.

And we've worked hard to try to connect to those parts of the world where there either was no constellation or an inactive one and try to revitalize or call forth how can we be of better help?

That's been one of the pieces, and also with the closings of *Regina Mundi* [an international study center in Rome that was closed in 2006] we've initiated "*Regina Mundi in Diaspora*," where we're helping to fund some educational opportunities for sisters from developing countries to be educated in their own country, but helping to provide some monies to make that possible.

That's been one of the things that we've developed in this time also.

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