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Vatican denies rift over handling of US sisters

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 7, 2013 NCR Today
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The Vatican press office issued a statement Tuesday saying recent remarks by a key Vatican official that he had not been consulted before issuing of a controversial 2012 order toward U.S. Catholic sisters do not indicate a split among Vatican offices.

The official, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, said Sunday he had not been given knowledge of the April 2012 criticism of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), made by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Speaking in Rome at a triennial meeting of some 800 sisters who lead orders of women religious around the world, Braz de Aviz said the order [1] towards LCWR had caused him "much pain" and indicated the Vatican has to "change this way of doing things."

Braz de Aviz has led the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life since 2011. As first reported by *NCR*, he was commenting on an order made by the Vatican's doctrinal congregation under the leadership of U.S. Cardinal William Levada, who has since retired from the post.

The Vatican press office said in its statement Tuesday that "recent media commentary" of Braz de Aviz' remarks "has suggested a divergence" between the two Vatican offices.

"Such an interpretation of the Cardinal's remarks is not justified," the statement, which was released in English [2], continued. "The Prefects of these two Congregations work closely together according to their specific responsibilities."

Braz de Aviz' remarks were made regarding what is known as a doctrinal assessment of LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of some 57,000 U.S. sisters.

The assessment ordered the group to revise and place itself under the authority of Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain, who was given a mandate to serve as its "archbishop-delegate" for five years.

LCWR has repeatedly said the reasons cited by the Vatican for the review were not an accurate representation of their work. Speaking to the international sisters' meeting Saturday, LCWR president, Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon said [3] the situation with her group indicates there are "serious misunderstandings" between Vatican officials and Catholic sisters.

In his own remarks at the gathering Sunday, Braz de Aviz said that his office -- which is tasked with overseeing the work an estimated 1.5 million sisters, brothers, and priests around the world in religious orders -- first learned of the move against the U.S. sisters' group in a meeting with the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith after the formal report on the matter had been completed.

At that meeting, Braz de Aviz said, he told Cardinal William Levada, an American who has since retired as head of the doctrinal congregation, that the matter should have been discussed between the Vatican offices.

"We will obey what the Holy Father wants and what will be decided through you," Braz de Aviz told the sisters he had said to Levada. "But we must say that this material which should be discussed together has not been discussed together."

"I obeyed," Braz de Aviz continued telling the sisters. "But I had so much pain within me."

The Vatican's statement Tuesday said Braz de Aviz had met with the current head of the Vatican's doctrinal congregation, Archbishop Gerhard Müller, on Monday.

Reads the statement: "Archbishop Gerhard Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Cardinal Braz de Aviz met yesterday and reaffirmed their common commitment to the renewal of Religious Life, and particularly to the Doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR and the program of reform it requires, in accordance with the wishes of the Holy Father."

The full text of the statement from the Vatican press office follows:

> The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life have for some time been collaborating on a renewed theological vision of Religious Life in the Church. The concern of the Holy See, expressed partially in the Doctrinal Assessment of the *Leadership Conference of Women Religious* in the United States, is motivated by a desire to support the noble and beautiful vocation of Religious so that the eloquent witness of Religious Life may prosper in the Church to the benefit of future generations.
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> The initiatives of the Holy See in this area are concerned primarily with the faith of the Church and its expression in Religious Life. The Church's faith?in the loving plan of the Father who sent his Son to be our Savior, in the inspiration of Sacred Scripture, in the gift of grace through the Sacraments, in the nature of the Church guided by the Holy Spirit?this faith is at the heart of the Evangelical Counsels. It motivates the passion for justice shared by so many Religious women and men, and it seeks ever to be expressed in active charity towards those most in need.
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> Recent media commentary on remarks made on Sunday May the 5th during the General Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General by Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, has suggested a divergence between the CDF and the Congregation for Religious in their approach to the renewal of Religious Life. Such an interpretation of the Cardinal's remarks is not justified. The Prefects of these two Congregations work closely together according to their specific responsibilities and have collaborated throughout the process of the Doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR. Archbishop Gerhard Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Cardinal Braz de Aviz met yesterday and reaffirmed their common commitment to the renewal of Religious Life, and particularly to the Doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR and the program of reform it requires, in accordance with the wishes of the Holy Father.

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