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Questions linger after dynamic sisters' meeting

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19th UISG assembly
Editorial

It is understandable that much of the attention paid to the recent meeting of the International Union of Superiors General in Rome was focused at detecting the state of things between the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Vatican.

That is, of course, an important relationship and one that became particularly strained during Pope Benedict XVI?s reign, which saw a Vatican-imposed investigation and an attempt at a virtual takeover of the organization, an umbrella group for some 80 percent of U.S. sisters.

Exactly where all of this now goes under the new papacy of Francis is yet unknown. However, what became clear during the meeting in Rome is that while LCWR?s troubles may be an important part of the story, they remain only a portion of the larger global picture coming to light among leaders of women religious around the world.

That picture -- the global picture -- was the primary story as far as those 800 women religious leaders were concerned. Of course, the two focuses -- the future of LCWR and the lives and roles of women religious in the wider church -- are deeply entwined.

The Vatican investigation notwithstanding, U.S. women religious leaders, under the auspices of LCWR, are working to establish deeper relationships and congregational ties with their counterparts in the global South, where vocation numbers are booming but material resources are scarce. Establishing closer North-South ties allows the sisters of the North, whose mean age is well above 70, to work with and help educate -- while learning from -- their far younger sisters in the developing world. LCWR in two recent general assemblies passed resolutions specifically calling for the development of more effective global religious ties.

Longtime observers of the International Union of Superiors General noted an important demographic shift at the recently concluded assembly [1]. There were fewer women from the North and more from the South. The international union, as much as any global Catholic network, is tracking the new vitality emerging in religious communities in Africa and Asia.

Some of the most dynamic discussions on the future of religious life followed talks from voices out of Africa and Central America. Discussions and feedback and further questions are an essential makeup of the assembly?s programs, which are laced with time for liturgies and other prayerful reflections. The clergy of our church, whose assemblies are more rigid by nature, have much to learn from the women.

Although its members are graying, LCWR embodies a breadth and depth of experience as well as a fidelity, history and wisdom regarding religious life that is vital to the church. U.S. women religious are, in many ways, well ahead of others in re-imagining what the church of the 21st century should look like and what a religious

vocation and ministry will one day mean. More than any other group within the church they have been working for decades in the very ?peripheries,? where Francis says the work of the church must now be done.

Meanwhile, there were positive signs during the assembly that the top leadership in the Vatican?s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, which oversees some 1.5 million sisters, brothers and priests in religious orders around the world, has a distinctive Francis-inclined pastoral bent and wants to work with the women in a spirit of inclusive, mutual respect. This augurs well for the future of religious life.

At the same time, Francis, who spoke to [2] and received the women, disappointed more than a few with some tired metaphors, viewing the women as primarily mothers and sisters, seemingly anything but the professionals they are. The misrepresentations in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith?s findings against LCWR have pushed many women religious to a precipice. It is not clear if Francis yet understands this.

It needs to be said that Francis was warm and gracious and was received equally warmly by the women. Despite the disappointment that the International Union of Superiors General leadership did not have the opportunity to address the pope, the audience appeared to mark a step forward in religious-Vatican ties.

The women were especially lifted by the general tone of the remarks and answers to questions by Brazilian Cardinal João Bráz de Aviz, prefect for the congregation for religious, even though he did not elaborate on the status of the apostolic investigation of U.S. women religious communities.

Some women said they were stunned when he talked about the personal pain [3] he felt when he learned that the doctrinal congregation had not consulted or notified him about the assessment of LCWR. It was a pain they shared.

Two days later, the cardinal refused to backtrack on his frank remarks after the Vatican press office implied (falsely) in a statement that *NCR* had misrepresented his comments. To the contrary, Bráz de Aviz described Joshua McElwee?s *NCR* report as ?precise [4]? and ?appreciated.?

It seems prudent to allow Francis time to put his leadership stamp on the church. At the same time, questions beg to be answered: Can the most educated and dedicated women religious in church history determine their own course, in dialogue with the hierarchy? Can they shape their own destinies based on understandings of vocation, founded in the Second Vatican Council, that have evolved from half a century of research, prayer and discernment?

How these questions get answered will reverberate through women religious communities, North and South, for decades to come.

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