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Vatican religious prefect: LCWR must address doctrinal issues

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If U.S. Catholic sisters want to dialogue with the Vatican over a mandate requiring them to place themselves under the authority of a U.S. archbishop, they must understand that the "central point" of dialogue is upholding church doctrine, a key Vatican cardinal said in May.

The doctrinal problems identified with the main group of U.S. sisters, known as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), are "extremely important," Cardinal João Braz de Aviz said.

"This is the central point of the dialogue," Braz de Aviz said. "I have no idea how it will be resolved."

Braz de Aviz, the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, made his comments in May in Rome during a talk at the triennial meeting of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), a membership group for approximately 2,000 leaders of Catholic sisters around the world.

While the cardinal's remarks to the sisters, first reported by *NCR* [1], garnered wide attention at the time, the full text of Braz de Aviz's talk was never made public. *NCR* will publish the cardinal's full 80-minute talk in three parts on Thursday [2], Friday and Monday.

The Vatican's order against LCWR, Braz de Aviz said in the second part, was made without consultation or knowledge of his office, which normally deals with matters of religious life. That lack of discussion, he says, caused him "great pain and hurt."

"I saw that within this action that I perceived as God's will, there was something missing and this hurt me," he said. "It hurt me very much."

The order regarding LCWR was issued in April 2012 from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It gives Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain a five-year mandate to execute wide-ranging authority over LCWR's statutes and programs.

LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of the some 57,000 U.S. sisters, will gather Aug. 13-16 in Orlando, Fla., for its annual meeting.

Among other points addressed by Braz de Aviz in the second part of his talk in Rome:

- Pope Francis might be responsive to a request for an audience with LCWR leaders: "You cannot just go in with your side of the story only. You must take the different perspectives into account."
- The need for "true equality" among Christians: "No one can be truly human, even in the most developed countries, if one claims to be superior to the other. We all have the same dignity."
- A "fundamental" need for sisters and others to work on the periphery: "In this manner, the church reaches

out to the poor. We are to have no fear in going out to the poor."

Braz de Aviz has been at the congregation, officially known as the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, since 2011. He oversees the work of an estimated 1.5 million sisters, brothers and priests around the world in religious orders.

The cardinal took questions May 5 during a meeting with some 800 UISG members, each leaders of sisters' communities around the world, who had gathered in Rome from May 3-7 to focus on the theme of servant leadership.

Speaking in the afternoon after celebrating Mass with the sisters earlier in the day, Braz de Aviz frequently paused during his answers to laugh and to accept several sustained bouts of applause.

Following is the second part of Braz de Aviz's May talk to women religious in Rome, with minor edits for context. Braz de Aviz, a native Brazilian, spoke in Italian. Biagio Mazza, a native Italian who serves as a pastoral associate at a Kansas City, Mo.-area parish, provided translation for *NCR*.

A UISG representative asked Braz de Aviz questions on behalf of the sisters, who created the questions in group discussions the day before. She asked several questions at once and let the cardinal respond at length.

Part three of the cardinal's talk, which will be published Monday, focuses on the need for a sense of gender equality in the church and on strengthening roles for women's leadership.

***UISG* questioner: Our next question is on the relationship of the prophetic mission to religious life. Several were asking, "What do you consider to be important for religious life since the synod on the new evangelization?"**

The pope is inviting us to go out to the peripheries, to the margins. For us as religious, that makes us ask ourselves: What are the urgencies? What are the priorities, even the geographic priorities?

How do you see the prophetic role of religious life and evangelization? How can we recapture the prophetic mission and how can we also be in places of conflict?

Braz de Aviz: At first, evangelization was linked with sword and cannon. All we have to do is look at history and realize that such is the case. Sword, cannon and Gospel came together for many of us. Is it not true?

Therefore, it has been very difficult to distinguish the Gospel from the cannon and the sword. Many great people have done much harm in this.

The new evangelization has created a society in which no one can be truly human, even in the most developed countries, if one claims to be superior to the other. We all have the same dignity. This is most important for Christianity. We can no longer dominate others in order to change them.

For example, in Brazil during slavery, blacks who were slaves of white masters had to be Catholic. Blacks, in order to survive and live, accepted baptism under the Catholic master. But underneath, they maintained their own values by changing the names of their deities and referred to them with Catholic Christian names.

For example, today we have a religious syncretism, a phenomenon resulting from a way of conducting ourselves as Catholic. Therefore, we cannot say that this syncretism is evil or needs to be purged. Rather, we must enter into the heart of the situation and understand what it is.

Only when we say that the other is equal to me, when I am a true brother or sister, when I talk about the

experiences that form us, only then can I communicate the Gospel. We need to learn how to speak about our experiences.

For example: Among you are sisters who practically live lives of martyrdom. I myself saw such a reality in Iraq. There are many who live amidst many conflicts and difficulties, doing so year in and year out, often hidden, suffering, in great difficulties.

The church has no one else to live such lives and experiences. You are it. We are it. This is truly great. Over time, this generates a new story of maturity.

For example, I traveled to Taiwan. I cannot comprehend how the church for more than a century has had such extraordinary leadership. They have four Catholic universities guiding 60,000, yet their conversion numbers are only 1 percent.

How do we work and carry on? We need to continue to work more faithfully, without fear, proclaiming whom we follow with our lives and our words while at the same time respecting and valuing those of other cultures. This is very important, something that for us is extraordinarily essential for the peace we wish to bring about. It is an education that we need to and must learn.

Even I as a cardinal feel that I am not ready. I have not mastered this. I have to prepare myself with the values and life of the Gospel. If I don't do so, then I will not succeed in continuing our task in the midst of difficulties and sufferings. We must value these experiences because they can offer us encouragement and support.

Others need not only our money or material support. They need to feel that people are close to them, [that they] understand what they are going through and share in their hearts that same experience. They are part of our hearts.

Therefore, if our own works are not Gospel-based, they serve little. We often put up with all sorts of difficulties, lack of money or other resources, but unless we are Gospel-based, we will not succeed at saving people. As a result, religious will leave, become tired and don't feel they can go on in their consecrated life.

But you say that our formation has inculcated in us values that are truly humanitarian and concerned for others.

You superiors must have care and allow the other to speak, because the first time that the true issues surface is when we allow the other to speak. Do not approach the person with a solution in hand.

I went to visit a Claretian sister who has been thrown out of her cloister and could not return to her convent. She had a bundle of troubles, and it was affecting her bodily welfare. I personally went out to visit her because in the hierarchy of her order, she did not have much value. She had been thrown out.

I listened to her for one hour without saying one word. At the end, she said to me, "Thank you, because today the church has heard me. Someone really listened to me."

I got up and gave her a great big kiss on her head, and I hugged her, saying, "Look, I am very happy." And the following week, I heard that she was able to return to her convent.

That sister had come to us before, but we had not received her at our congregation offices. I asked why. Today, she and her prioress write to me, happy, friendly, two who before had problems.

Why can't we alleviate such difficult situations with love? I think that we need to change our way of operating, including myself as well.

Going out to the periphery. This is fundamental, even for us here at the Vatican. What does this mean for us? For example, to see each piece of paper as important, not merely as a canonical case, but as seeing each person that such cases represent as important.

For us, it means going to those places or parishes where we have been assigned, each one of us following our unique charism. In this manner, the church reaches out to the poor. We are to have no fear in going out to the poor.

The pope is giving us an outstanding example of this. I believe that the pope will continue living at Santa Marta because there, the structure and context is much lighter.

The question about prophetic mission is the same. I do not think we need to address this because it goes along the same lines that we have been addressing. But if we are not truly in Jesus, if we do not have the same love as Jesus, I do not know what else we can bring to others.

There are many that have much, a great deal. There are cultures that have much and there is nothing that we can bring them to aid them materially. But if we have the love of Jesus, this we do bring because this is often missing. This is what we continually bring with us.

The next group of questions has to do with what's been going on in the conference of religious in the United States. Where are we with the apostolic visitation? When can we hope that it will be finished? What steps are being taken to resolve this situation?

In light of the coming restructuring of the Curia, do you see any hope for greater understanding between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Congregation for Religious, and LCWR?

We're also asking what reading can we give today of religious life in the United States? And would it be possible to have a meeting of LCWR with the Holy Father?

That's a lot of questions. We will take them one at a time. At this time, where is the apostolic visitation of LCWR and when will it be over or completed? From what I know, some of the leadership of LCWR have met with [Archbishop] Gerhard Müller, head of CDF as well as with us.

What are the limits that have been put in place by CDF? A doctrinal evaluation that has been published, which is a solid point of reference. The other is the data that will be gathered over the next five years since the evaluation was completed.

This period of five years, of which one year has already passed, is to be accomplished together with the archbishop of Seattle, Peter Sartain.

What is the difficulty? LCWR, from what I understand, says that they are not interested in doctrinal issues and as such, they do not see how the doctrinal assessment is addressed to them. The Holy See's total focus is on doctrinal issues.

What is the situation? The issue between LCWR and Sartain is an issue of dialogue. This is very good.

We don't know where this will lead because we were not instructed in these matters -- or we, the Congregation for Consecrated and Apostolic life, have no authority over this. Many of these cases are removed from our authority.

For example, the case of the Sisters of St. Jean in France. We can now evaluate it because the pope has given us

permission to have a dialogue with them. But up to a little while ago, this was not possible because the pontifical commissioner became the papal delegate and his authority came directly from the pope.

But now that the authority has been restored to us, we will follow up on it. But in the case of LCWR, we are not in authority. Rather, it is in the hands of Sartain and CDF.

Where is the situation at the moment? I think that it is at a difficult point or state. But it must be clear that the problem is not with the 59,000 sisters of the U.S. but with the LCWR. I am speaking in the way that I hear or understand things. In this sense, it is here that the dialogue needs to be intense.

How to resolve the problem? LCWR doesn't feel that the doctrinal issues are theirs. How does one square away this issue with the issue of consecrated people in the church? This is a very difficult problem.

One must discuss what it means when they say that they are not interested in doctrinal issues, and we say that the doctrinal issues are extremely important. This is the central point of the dialogue. I have no idea how it will be resolved. We have to trust the participants in the dialogue.

Is there a misunderstanding between Congregation for Consecrated Life and CDF? I want you to know that there is full understanding, full understanding between us and CDF. I want to repeat it because there is no disagreement between us and CDF.

There was an accusation made of [Indianapolis Archbishop Joseph] Tobin, the former secretary that I love dearly and who left under great difficulty and suffering, that he was responsible. I do not think that he was responsible for what happened.

Rumors that he acted in an unjust manner with LCWR are not true. There was a dialogue that slowly progressed, but its partners were very separated. On one side, the CDF was working on the issue. On the other side, the Congregation for Consecrated Life was working on the issue also.

One worked with the inquiry or examination or inquest -- the other with an apostolic visitation. These two things were going on without one knowing what the other was doing. When it became necessary to do the doctrinal examination, in that meeting ,Tobin and I said to [Cardinal William] Levada [who led the CDF from 2005 to 2012]:

"We will obey what the Holy Father desires and what will be decided through you. We will obey, peacefully and without hesitation. But we must say that this subject which should have been discussed together has not been so discussed. We do not want you to say to everyone that this is the wish of the Congregation for Consecrated Life."

Therefore, we separated the waters in this fashion, or we distanced ourselves from that decision.

Is this making sense or not? I would be willing to repeat what we have gone over. This is a painful and difficult situation.

I'll tell you more. When I went to the synod on the new evangelization, I was to speak on the subject of consecrated life. I did not have the courage because at that moment, it seemed to me that we were to cooperate with God's will, for the pope desired us to do this.

But I saw that within this action that I perceived as God's will, there was something missing, and this hurt me. It hurt me very much. What did I do? I obeyed because I believe in the church, but I suffered greatly. I could not speak. I remained silent.

Thank God that the other religious men and women spoke, filling up the time. But I did not speak at all, because there was within me a great pain and hurt. This should not be. We decided on something in a non-Christian manner.

I say this to you with an open heart, without fear of anything. I am telling you exactly what happened. This does not mean that we continue to operate this way. We must change this way of operating. We must do much better in gathering these reports.

We need to stress our communal nature and our fidelity to one another. Each cardinal cannot go on undermining or not trusting the other. Neither must decisions be made without seeing the connections with other things. This is not the way the church should operate. The church is a communion, similar to what you are doing here in Rome.

Is this OK or is it too much for you?

Would it be possible to have a meeting between LCWR and the pope? I think so. But it is also important for you to make an account of the journey you have taken and what you are doing. You cannot just go in with your side of the story only. You must take the different perspectives into account.

I believe that Pope Francis will not be a stranger to you. You need to know that. He has confirmed the doctrinal assessment. He wants it to be carried out. Thus it might be good in meeting with him to ask what he understands by this doctrinal assessment.

This is what a faithful journey together is all about. We must deal with the concrete situation and move to new paths from there. But what those new paths are, both sides have to say what is possible.

There are these markers within which we can journey together, not in the sense of exclusion of one another but in walking the same essential faith journey together based on the Gospel. We say once again to our sisters in LCWR: "Have faith in us, and we will continue to have faith in you."

But we know that this is something suffused with pain. For we know that the pain is great.

Part three of Braz de Aviz's May talk to women religious in Rome will appear Monday at NCRonline.org.

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