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Editorial: Misguided LCWR mandate lumbers onward

NCR Editorial Staff | Aug. 23, 2013

Four and half years ago, in February 2009, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith first announced it was beginning a "doctrinal assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

It has been a long and arduous process, one that has tarnished LCWR's reputation, sapped its energy, and made it a target of adversaries on the right.

The women leaders, among the most faithful and theologically educated in the church, have all been elected to leadership positions from within their congregations. They have continued to meet with Vatican officials, largely maintaining a Vatican-imposed silence, except for periodic short statements.

In April 2012, the congregation concluded its assessment. It found the organization guilty of undermining church teachings and appointed Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain to set it straight, first by studying the group's charter and overseeing its programs.

Last year at its annual August gathering, LCWR responded to the Vatican findings. After gaining consensus from its body, it committed itself to an "open and honest" dialogue with Sartain, but only as long as it could maintain its integrity.

The women have met with Sartain on at least four occasions in the past year. During the process, LCWR defended itself. However, the doctrinal congregation, it appears, has found deficiencies in these defenses.

This brings us to this year's assembly. In three closed-door "executive sessions," the women assessed the process and prepared themselves to listen to Sartain, who was at the entire assembly and presided over liturgies.

The archbishop's address to the women offered few, if any, new insights. Instead, most of his talk focused on Jesus, with lessons to be drawn by the women. Pressed in a question-and-answer period, Sartain reportedly did not delve into further details.

By conference's end, at least some of the women were asking how much longer the process would go on. Observers on the outside were just left wondering.

One inescapable truth is that a group of men, meeting in secret, assessed, judged and found guilty a women's organization. The LCWR tale is anchored in a culture of male clericalism, out of step with contemporary mores. The second-class role of women in the church and an exclusively male authority structure are fundamental starting points for understanding the dynamics of the Vatican/LCWR story.

By almost any contemporary standard founded in human dignity, the process has been unjust, with virtually no allowances for a reasonable defense. Indeed, the process reveals more about the state of our church than anything its findings have revealed about the women.

The Vatican and supporting bishops -- the assessment report passed through the hands of the U.S. cardinals in

Rome -- continue to try to separate LCWR from the U.S. women religious communities, condemning the former, lavishing praise on the latter. The "work" of women religious, the prelates say, is exemplary. The problem is the leadership organization, they say, without recognizing that the leadership conference is inseparable from its members.

By a wide consensus of the larger church, women religious have been modeling a more attractive vision of the Catholic faith than have the bishops in recent decades. The prelates have much to learn from the women if they could only stop the cheap "women are special" platitudes and truly open their eyes.

LCWR meetings are far more spirited and far less crafted than comparable meetings of the U.S bishops.

The fact is that few organizations anywhere are as democratic and representative as is LCWR. In contrast to the bishops, all members have been voted to leadership by their communities and represent those communities locally, regionally and nationally. LCWR presidents rotate yearly. LCWR changes, develops, but also maintains continuity. Past presidents are valued and are invited to annual assemblies to add their perspectives. Our church is blessed with an articulation of the Gospels by women who can access multiple means of communication and no longer need to filter their words through the male clerical culture.

LCWR's work should be celebrated, not demeaned.

An honest telling of this sordid story reveals that the men who initiated the investigation have receded from center stage, replaced by men who seem less enthusiastic about continuing the distress. Yet the system does not allow for an admission of any mistake in process or judgment. And so a clearly misguided and spirit-depleting episcopal mandate lumbers onward.

Trying to get a handle on precisely what the women did wrong is a task in itself. The accusations have been a moving target. When the doctrinal congregation first announced the assessment in February 2009, it caught LCWR off guard. The congregation claimed then that LCWR had failed to respond adequately to three doctrinal concerns it had first raised 2001: women's ordination, the primacy of the Catholic faith, and homosexuality.

This came as a shock to the LCWR leaders who had traveled to Rome annually between 2001 and 2009, making themselves available to Vatican officials -- who never raised those concerns.

With the assessment underway, in meetings in Rome in April 2010, the LCWR leadership found the prelates more upset by their support for universal health care than any doctrinal matters. LCWR had been among the Catholic organizations that had supported the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act. The U.S. bishops had opposed the bill, claiming it would provide financing for abortions, a charge LCWR and other Catholics contested.

Then in April 2012, when the doctrinal congregation announced its findings, the charges against LCWR had again morphed. The congregation charged LCWR with undermining church teachings on homosexuality and birth control, and promoting "radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith." "Radical feminism" does not appear in the creed, though Jesus, who included women, supported women, and appeared first to a woman following the Resurrection -- by most fair measures, a radical feminist in his time.

* * *

For its part, LCWR is committed to a strategy of nonviolent engagement with its accusers and its overseer, who appears to bring an open heart to the process. You'd have to listen a long time to hear an LCWR member utter an uncharitable word about Sartain. Meanwhile, LCWR is attempting, seemingly to a fault, to work out of models of consensus and inclusivity. It has promised to maintain "an open and honest" dialogue, but we learned

in Orlando that it is only open to a certain extent.

The dialogue between the Vatican and LCWR is taking place in secret, and that is worrisome. The stated purpose of this secrecy is to protect the process, but the process has continued for more than four years. When do we finally get to see the much prized and sought-after transparent church modeled?

LCWR has said it wants to model this new church. It says it wants to be a voice of the laity as well as the religious, but continued secrecy undermines these goals. The LCWR conference's theme focused on evolution and moving toward "open systems," but the process appears mired in a closed and anachronistic system.

By agreeing to the ongoing secrecy, the sisters seem to be playing into the very culture that is accusing them. We would hope that the silence is only temporary.

One thing that we have learned in this four-year saga is that the LCWR leadership should not be underestimated. Their model of engagement, for its apparent weaknesses, has helped highlight church injustices and is in the process of bringing to clear light trumped-up charges for all the church to see -- all, perhaps, but those who need to see it most and learn the lessons, those misogynist prelates who first went after the women.

Some would say that LCWR's strategic plan of episcopal engagement is bound to fail, that they are up against an immovable object and should throw in the ecclesial towel.

But perhaps the group has assessed that these are not ordinary times, and they recognize that there is likely to be new leadership with a Pope Francis bent at the doctrinal congregation, that this is precisely not the time to break off the engagement, the dialogue.

Perhaps Francis himself is watching impatiently, recognizing the women have heeded for decades the call the pontiff has made to work at the peripheries. Perhaps, Sartain, in his own privacy, has concluded the same.

Perhaps.

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