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Conflict with Vatican shadows upcoming LCWR assembly

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 5, 2014
LCWR 2014
Analysis

U.S. women religious leaders face an uncertain future as they gather Aug. 12-16 in Nashville, Tenn., for their annual assembly.

More than 800 elected congregational leaders will discuss how they plan to react to continued charges of infidelity leveled by the church's top enforcer of orthodoxy, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as well as to the congregation's plans to take over the organization after the assembly.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents nearly all the women religious congregations in America, has been under attack by the congregation since 2012. The Nashville gathering will be the third consecutive LCWR assembly in which church infighting overshadows the business of the leadership conference.

The issues are multilayered, involving disputes over the role of religious life, the relationship between religious and bishops, questions of obedience, and differing visions of church priorities and mission.

Beneath these is one more: the role of women in a church that maintains a gender-determined authority system. The conflict between LCWR and the doctrinal congregation has become the most visible manifestation of this highly charged issue.

The congregation upped the ante April 30 by setting a deadline to take control of LCWR. Prefect Cardinal Gerhard Müller, in a harsh statement that reiterated Vatican charges of LCWR's doctrinal breaches, said that beginning in August, LCWR must clear with a bishop overseer future assembly speakers and honorees.

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Glance at history

It was in 2009 that the congregation first announced a "doctrinal assessment" of LCWR. In April 2012, it found LCWR had failed to represent church teachings in its assemblies, and it placed the group under the authority of Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, who was designated its "archbishop delegate," with a mandate to revise the group's charter and to restore doctrinal fidelity.

Sartain and the women began a series of closed-door meetings, which the sisters and Sartain have characterized at various times as cordial but frank. Sartain has said he has "developed a very good relationship" with the group's leadership.

The leadership team's annual visit to Vatican offices in April this year had gone well. The women reported cordial receptions in various Vatican offices.

This was not the case at the doctrinal congregation. The meeting was reportedly respectful but blunt, its tone determined by an initial address by Müller, an appointee of Pope Benedict XVI. He was highly critical of the women, charging them of errant theology and a breach of good faith. He said the women had thumbed their noses at the U.S. bishops by choosing to honor Fordham University theologian St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson at its upcoming August assembly.

Müller cited this as evidence the women were not intending to abide by the 2012 Vatican-mandated reform process, a five-year effort.

Though the proposed LCWR honoree is a highly acclaimed theologian, in March 2011 the U.S. bishops' Doctrine Committee took her to task for one of her books, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. Though backed by her theological peers and colleagues at Fordham, the committee found her work marred by "misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors."

Müller's remarks to the women revealed considerable frustration. In his address, he drew a line, saying that LCWR would have to seek Sartain's approval of any future honorees or presenters in LCWR programs.

Question of integrity

For women who both say they want to stay at the table and yet maintain their integrity as they discuss disagreements with the bishops, this deadline presents new pressures. An LCWR assembly voted overwhelmingly in 2012 to work with Sartain but said it would "reconsider if LCWR is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission."

Sartain will attend the Nashville assembly, and, once again, private talks are planned.

It's been a difficult period for LCWR, which claims some 1,500 leader members, who represent about 90 percent of the more than 50,000 women religious in the United States. LCWR says it has been forced to shift limited resources out of ongoing congregational support activities into defending its reputation, if not its very existence as an independent religious organization.

The psychological toll is also evident. A group that once prided itself on fearless leadership and modeling transparency is now more media restrictive than most other Catholic organizations, including the U.S. bishops.

LCWR continues to embrace setting a course that evolves from prayerful contemplation and discussion among members. At the center of its stated mission is its desire to help women religious understand how religious communities are to respond to the Gospels in contemporary society.

To this end, through a canvassing of its membership, LCWR leadership chose Franciscan Sr. Nancy Schreck, a former LCWR president, to lead the organization through its discernment process this year.

Coming out of six years of community leadership, Schreck knows the LCWR-Vatican scene well. Her subject, "However Long the Night," she told NCR, is aimed at inducing a contemplative atmosphere in which the women can reflect on their future course together. Schreck has spent some 20 years working among risk-prone

youth in rural Mississippi. She typifies the pastoral commitment that has come to characterize LCWR in particular, and U.S. women religious in general.

She said the title of her talk does not refer specifically to the LCWR-Vatican situation. Rather, she said, she wants to explore mystery. "Great mysteries are revealed to us in darkness," she said. "Night is not necessarily a bad thing."

Asked to elaborate, she said, "A wise teacher once told me that mystery is not something unknowable, but rather infinitely knowable."

While LCWR's entanglement with the doctrinal congregation cannot be far from the minds of most of the women who come to Nashville, Schreck said that lots of women "don't want to focus on the [doctrinal] assessment. They want to get on with their work."

Absence of Francis

Many church observers had hoped that Pope Francis would intervene in the quagmire. He has encouraged church members to take risks. He jokingly told Latin American religious leaders to take lightly directives they get from the doctrinal congregation. He has said the work of the church must take place at the margins of society. He has told bishops to focus less on abortion and contraception, and more on mercy and service to the needy.

In each instance, he has outlined a church very much like the one U.S. women religious committed themselves to building some 40 years or more ago. This is why many church observers find it mystifying Francis has not stepped in to lighten LCWR's load.

The irony is that Francis might otherwise have stepped in were it not that he is reportedly focused on dealing with failed bishops who have enabled clergy sex abuse and the misuse of church finances.

The women coming to Nashville appear to be of at least two minds, though not necessarily exclusively so. Some would like to call off the discussions with the congregation and Sartain. They argue that despite good intentions, the two sides remain far apart, with no signs they can overcome the gulf. This group feels that once an outsider bishop has seized control of LCWR, the organization has lost its integrity.

The other group generally agrees that the picture looks bleak, but wants to give more time for Francis to spread his influence within the Vatican. This group wants to be supportive of the pope and feels he might be their only chance for serious church renewal.

That both Schreck and Johnson have been chosen to address the women represents the variety of opinion and approaches among them.

LCWR celebrates a democratic governance style. It is difficult to know what might come out of Nashville until the last hour of the last day, after the talks are finished and votes taken. This, however, appears clear: It's highly unlikely the LCWR saga will end in Tennessee.

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