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Exclusive interview: Levada talks LCWR, criticism in the States

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 15, 2012 All Things Catholic

Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Vatican's ultra-powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is a devoted disciple of his boss and mentor, Pope Benedict XVI, in virtually every way save one. While the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was a celebrity as a Vatican official, Levada, who turns 76 today, keeps a much lower profile, preferring to operate behind the scenes.

Levada rarely gives interviews, and when he does, it's because he has something to say, not because he simply enjoys the exercise.

As a result, when Levada agreed to an exclusive one-on-one interview this week to discuss the Vatican's dust-up with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, you can take it to the bank that it wasn't a casual choice. Instead, it amounted to acknowledgment that the LCWR dispute has stirred enormous discussion, much of it critical of the Vatican, and this was Levada's effort to respond.

For instance, Levada knows well that the move has been perceived as an attack on religious women across the board, and insisted that those perceptions miss the mark.

"We're sad if people somehow think that these guys in Rome are trying to bring the hammer down on our nuns, or don't appreciate them. The assessment is actually effusive in its praise of the work nuns have done over the years," Levada said.

"This assessment is not about the sisters in the United States," he said. "It's about the Leadership Conference of Women Religious."

The interview was arranged several days before a meeting Tuesday in Levada's office with two representatives of LCWR, so his decision to grant it was not a response to anything that happened that morning. The fact that the interview took place shortly after the meeting ended, however, also afforded the chance to discuss its results.

Levada limited the scope of the interview to LCWR (so no questions on the Lefebvrites, for instance), but other than that, he placed no restrictions on the ground to be covered. The conversation took place in his residence, located across St. Peter's Square from his office, and lasted roughly one hour.

I published a news piece [1] with highlights from the interview Tuesday. The following is the full text of the exchange.

Readers following the LCWR story may also be interested in a Q&A [2] I published Wednesday with Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle, the American bishop tapped by the Vatican to lead an overhaul of LCWR, who also participated in Tuesday's Vatican meeting. The text of that interview, which took place in Rome at the North American College, can be found here [2].
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Interview with Cardinal William Levada
June 12, 2012

How did the meeting this morning go?

I think it went pretty well. Sr. Pat Farrell and Sr. Janet Mock, president and executive secretary of the LCWR, had asked to come over to give some more substantial and personal responses to the doctrinal assessment. I had discussed [the assessment] with them, and gave it to them personally, in our meeting on April 18. They said, "You invited us to speak frankly, and we want to do that. We're here to share our pain and our sense of why we were so stunned by this."

In a way, I understand that reaction. We've been accused of a lack of transparency, but in my view, putting everything out at once as we did was a gesture of transparency. We're not coming at this with a thousand cuts, saying first let's do this, then let's do that, and dragging it out. We have a collegial process, so something like this had to go through the congregation, the ordinary members, and then to the pope. It seemed necessary to me and the other superiors of the congregation that we have a clear statement of what this is about.

Did you pick up any indication of movement by the LCWR on the substantive issues in the assessment?

I wouldn't go so far as to say that. They talked to us about what a great outpouring of support they've had for the sisters in the United States. I'd like to say a word about that, for clarity's sake. This assessment is not about the sisters in the United States. It's about the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, a coordinating and directive body that has a spokesperson's role for 80 percent of the religious congregations in the States or so. It exists because of a canonical statute in which the Holy See invites them to do this work of coordination, in a way that's in sync with the teachings of the church and the directives of the Holy Father. That's the basic issue we discussed with them.

I think Bishop [Leonard] Blair did a very credible job with his investigative assessment and presenting it to LCWR and to us. I don't accept these accusations about a lack of transparency or "unsubstantiated accusations." This is not about people accusing LCWR of anything, it's about observing what happens in their assemblies, what's on their website, what they do or don't do.

We talked a lot about dialogue today. That's a big word with the LCWR. I shared with them my view that the nomination of a delegate to work with them is precisely about dialogue, especially someone with the qualities of Archbishop Sartain. I've known him for many years, and I have great admiration for his sense of faith and of ecclesial communion. I think he's the best person to engage in this kind of dialogue.

My concern, however, is that we've been going through this assessment for four years, and so far not much has changed. Along the way we've seen, for instance, an "occasional paper" [published by LCWR] by Charlie Curran, or Barbara Marx Hubbard is invited [to address the 2012 LCWR assembly]. In some ways, and I used this phrase today, it seems to me like a dialogue of the deaf. Sometimes people have different images of dialogue. For some, dialogue is an end in itself, while for some of us it's a means to an end. We'll see what happens. I'm not able to play the prophet in this matter.

From your point of view, it's premature to say that the LCWR is prepared to move on the substantive issues outlined in the doctrinal assessment?

I would say that's correct.

Speaking of Barbara Marx Hubbard, LCWR officials have said they went ahead with their assembly in August because you gave them permission to do so. Is that accurate?

Yes, mea culpa! At the time, I hadn't been aware of who was being invited to speak or to get an award. I appreciated their concern that everything was already in place, and I said that's fine, we're OK with that. We haven't asked them to do an about-face. I feel comfortable in saying, however, that I wish they hadn't made these choices.

By that, you mean the choice to invite Hubbard?

Yes, and also to give an award to Sr. Sandra Schneiders for a view of religious life which has nothing to do with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council or the post-conciliar church.

For the record, let me say again this is not about a criticism of the sisters. No sister will lose her job in teaching or charitable work or hospital work as a result of this assessment, as far as I know. ... This is about questions of doctrine, in response to God's revelation, and church tradition from the time of the apostles. We take that seriously. I've been doing this work for seven years, and I do it willingly, because I believe in it. It's not easy in a secular society like ours in the States, or in Europe for that matter.

The tensions outlined in the doctrinal assessment have been around for a long time. Why is this coming to a head now?

One answer is that the wheels turn slowly here in the Vatican. Also, when something comes [out of this office], people may be surprised by it, but that doesn't mean the process hasn't been under way for some time. It just goes to show that even in this age of Vatileaks, some of us are able to keep a pontifical secret.

In reality, this should not be a surprise to anyone. We started this process four years ago. I met with the representatives [of LCWR] then to explain it to them. Of course, these things go on at a snail's pace here, while the LCWR has changes in leadership all the time, so the new leaders may not be familiar with the history, and they have to go back over it all.

Why now? It's a reasonable question in that this is not new stuff. Yet it's cumulative, and at a certain point someone has to pay attention to it.

Looking at trends in religious life these days, some people would say that since younger religious tend to be more traditional, you could have simply waited. Why force the issue now?

We could be accused of being callous if we simply said, "What does it matter? These congregations aren't attracting new membership and so on, so let's just wait it out." But we're dealing with the life of faith, the life of the church. Most of what we do is an attempt to make that life of faith stronger. If you postpone doing something for 10, 20, 30 years, you're promoting a weaker faith life instead of a stronger one.

One theory for why you're acting now is that you're worried about property. Specifically, the charge is that the hierarchy wants to assert control over the real estate and other assets controlled by women's congregations before they walk away with it. Can you respond to that?

Matters of property are not the responsibility of this office. Church law does say that for "alienation of property," you're supposed to have approval of the Holy See, though sometimes that's more honored in the breach than the observance. But such questions are not our competency.

In general, I think the religious orders have a moral obligation, if they've got property and wealth on their hands,

to do the right thing with it, to be sure that it goes to educational and charitable works in accord with the intentions of the donors. Certainly, our congregation won't be in charge of it.

So concern about property had nothing to do with the doctrinal assessment?

Absolutely not.

You said a moment ago that this is not about "the sisters," but LCWR. Yet looking at recent events, including the apostolic visitation of women's orders in the States, the LCWR crackdown and the notification on Sr. Margaret Farley, many people can't help concluding that there is a broad attack underway on nuns in America.

I've read some articles along those lines, but it's just not the case. These things take a lot of time, and they all have their own logic. For instance, we didn't just wake up one day and say, "Let's go after Margaret Farley." Frankly, this came up because of an interview she gave in Ireland. She was there for a conference, and said something along the lines that Ireland ought to approve same-sex marriage. Someone in Ireland objected, asking, "Why is this sister coming from the States and pushing same-sex marriage?" We wrote to her superior and got a vague response about how she's a wonderful person who enjoys great esteem. That's how Margaret Farley came onto our radar screen. It had nothing to do with the LCWR. We then found [her book] *Just Love*, read the reviews, and the process developed from there.

I don't see any conspiracy. All of us as Catholics have responsibilities, but especially bishops, priests and religious, to speak the good word that is the faith of the church, which is that God is revealed through Jesus Christ. We have nothing to say about the "Gospel according to Maureen Dowd," of course, but Margaret Farley is a woman who represents the church.

If anything, [the Farley case] collaterally gives another example of why this LCWR assessment is taking place. Too many people crossing the LCWR screen who are supposedly representing the Catholic church aren't representing the church with any reasonable sense of product identity.

There's no concerted effort to beat up on the nuns?

I could say that some of my best friends are nuns. I had nuns all through school, and I used to go to visit a couple of them when they got old and so forth. I admire religious life, and I admire religious men and women. They're a great grace in and for the church. But if they aren't people who believe and express the faith of the church, the doctrines of the church, then I think they're misrepresenting who they are and who they ought to be.

On some points in the assessment, such as women's ordination and same-sex marriage, it's hardly just LCWR that's not in complete lockstep with official teaching. In some sectors of Catholic opinion, dissenting views on those points are widespread. Why pick on the women religious?

We're not picking on people. We're saying that people who have a representative role as spokespersons in and for the church also have a higher responsibility. It's the same standard with theologians, even if they're laity. We intervene, we give notifications and so forth. Sure, their books go off the charts, but we're here to say that this doesn't correspond with the truth of our Catholic tradition, with the revelation of Christ to the apostles.

I know some people say, "Isn't my opinion as good as anybody else's?" But this isn't a question of my opinion. I don't wake up and say, "Here's dogma B, C and D." These are the teachings of the church. Read the fathers of the church, read the medieval theologians and so on.

LCWR has said it's considering its response. What happens if they say, "We won't go along with this"?

I mentioned to the sisters today that we shouldn't look at this primarily from the angle of who's in charge here, what's the authority, and so forth. We should start with the issues, and how we can come to an understanding about the issues and the needs. There's a great deal of subsidiarity in the church, and religious communities are a classic example.

Of course, if you look at the church as a hierarchical structure -- whether you see that as benign, or something else -- ultimately, the pope is the superior. If he says, "Sisters, I want you to do this, I want you to take a look at these things, and so forth," that's what I hope will be the outcome.

I suppose if the sisters said, "OK, we're not cooperating with this," we can't force them to cooperate. What we can do, and what we'd have to do, is say to them, "We will substitute a functioning group for yours," if it comes to that.

What would such a "functioning group" look like?

Good question. I hope it would look like a conference that focuses on the priorities of religious life, the life of holiness, which is the fundamental call of all of us in the church, and the good that can come through the apostolic works that many of these orders are committed to and the prayers that others are committed to. I would like to see religious as champions of the mission of Jesus Christ in the church and the world.

So if the response is not satisfactory, the result could be decertification of LCWR?

It could be. We only have so much information, and what we've outlined is based on the information we have received. But as I mentioned to the sisters, if one or more parts of that is not correctly perceived, they will tell the bishop delegates, and that won't be a problem.

You spoke about substituting something else for the LCWR. Isn't there already something else, in the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious?

That's not my business. That's something that was decided years ago.

What's to prevent LCWR from making this decision for you, by deciding to reincorporate under civil law and cutting their ties with the official church?

I suppose nothing, assuming they could satisfy civil law concerns and pay for it. The Holy See, however, isn't going to give its patronage to it.

If that happens, would something new have to be created to replace LCWR?

It could very well be. I think there is a value to the work of coordination, on helping to get the religious communities to focus on common issues in their lives and in the church. What we would like to see, however, is an effective and strong LCWR.

I know many people have as a hope and a goal that eventually the CMSWR and the LCWR could reunite, but that's not part of this agenda. This is about the doctrinal strength and witness of the LCWR.

What can you say about the relationship between LCWR and the U.S. bishops?

That has come up in our conversations a little bit with the LCWR leadership. It certainly is a concern of many bishops. The relationship has not always been as strong and as beneficial as it might be.

When I was archbishop in Portland [Ore.] we had meetings, I think twice a year, between religious superiors or their delegates and bishops or their delegates. Those were good opportunities for us to share mutual concerns and to be supportive and so forth. They weren't perfect, but they were very helpful. I mentioned that to Sr. Pat Farrell, and she said they have something like that in Iowa and that it's been very useful.

I know the bishops are concerned about their relationship with religious in general, and particularly women religious, because there have been tensions over what we talk about as "feminist" ideas, such as the depiction of a patriarchal church, a patriarchal Bible and a patriarchal God. Ultimately, these are faith issues, and bishops have to be concerned about them. We all do, and I think they need to be on the table in these discussions.

Is part of the agenda here to bring LCWR under the control of the bishops' conference?

I don't think that. There's no idea that the result is going to be replacing religious institutes of pontifical right. It came up today in discussion, so I suppose it has crossed people's minds, but that's not my thought. I don't think bishops want to run religious life. They have plenty on their plate. They want to be in a collaborative, healthy relationship, that's the main thing.

This is not about the USCCB taking control of the LCWR?

Certainly not.

Some analysts have detected slightly different tones from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for Religious, with the latter broadly perceived as more open to dialogue with women religious. Does that concern you?

It's a concern insofar as it creates a perception that the Holy See is not united in its approach on these questions. Of course, you always have to allow for a difference of opinion and also a difference of approach. The Congregation for Religious has an enormous task. There are new groups coming up all over the world, and there are problematic areas they have to deal with all over.

Certainly, we all want to be nice, but we also need to be concerned for the truth, in a loving way. That's what our congregation would like to see as a particular focus in our work on behalf of the doctrine of the faith, to promote it as well as to safeguard it. All the offices of the Holy See are interested in that, but they have different competencies. The Congregation for Religious has an enormous panorama. I can only imagine what daily life must be like in that office, and the correspondence they get on this, that, and the other thing.

Is there a risk of mixed messages?

That depends on who you're talking to, and how you interpret what people are saying. I don't think that ultimately there's a mixed message, because the Holy Father has asked our congregation to implement this doctrinal assessment. We're doing it in conjunction with the Congregation for Religious, and for those things that are part of their competency, we'll certainly be working together.

We have different competencies, as is common in the different dicasteries of the Holy See, and even though our approaches may be different, we try to work together.

Would it be wrong for someone to conclude, on the basis of perceived differences within the Vatican, that you're not serious about the need for attention to the points in the assessment?

Yes, quite so. That's exactly right.

It's been reported that one of the prime movers in this process, behind the scenes, was Cardinal Bernard Law. Can you comment?

I don't think there's merit to those reports. Cardinal Law is certainly concerned about the vitality of religious life, and I've talked to him about it. Others of us here have, but he's not involved in this. We do have another American on the congregation, Cardinal [James] Stafford, but I discount such conspiracy theories and I would say they're not correct.

Are you willing to say that if people want to know who's responsible for this, the answer is you?

Correct, our congregation is.

It's a mistake to try to find others to blame for it?

Absolutely.

Is the bottom line, as you see it, that an institution that officially represents the church needs to do so in a way that's consistent with church teaching?

Yes, I think that's the bottom line. I recognize there are theories which say that religious life is not a creature of the church, it's not responsible to the church, and so forth. I think those are simply mistaken theories. There wouldn't be religious life if it were not for the church. There are, of course, different developments and different styles of religious life, whether they're contemplative, monastic, apostolic, and so forth, but in any case their whole mission is the mission Christ gave to the church. They aren't separate from that, and they can't be.

The church is a broad umbrella, and it doesn't quickly exclude people, even people who disagree on one point or the other. That's not just a question of different views, but also different behavior. People may not act morally, and that's why we have the sacrament of penance as an access to the mercy of God. The church is not hasty about excommunicating anybody. But ultimately, this is about a group that represents the church doing so in a way that is accountable to the teaching and tradition of the church.

There has been a wide outpouring of support for the sisters in the States, coupled with a good deal of criticism of the Vatican for its handling of the LCWR case. Are you aware of that reaction, and what do you make of it?

I'm certainly aware of it, and I think it's completely misplaced. In Catholic education, charities, and hospitals, none of these works is exempt from review and evaluation. We even review parishes. You go in and assess what's there, you talk to people, and you make commendations and recommendations. That's a standard procedure, and you can't say you're exempt from it because your faith is a private concern, a matter for your conscience. We can't know your conscience, because that's your relationship with God and there is an interior element to it. But we can know what you profess, what you say you believe, and what you recognize as the beliefs of the Catholic church. These are objective things.

We don't need to develop conspiracy theories or to impute sinister motives. None of that is applicable here. This is about keeping faith with Jesus, and not just as an external thing, but because it's a saving faith. It's grace, God inviting us to eternal happiness.

We're sad if people impute bad motives to us, or if they somehow think that these guys in Rome are trying to bring the hammer down on our nuns or don't appreciate them. The assessment is actually effusive in its praise of the work nuns have done over the years. We're interested in seeing that work continue and improve, that's all we

want.

What would count for you, in the short term, as evidence that the LCWR is moving in the right direction?

Enter into a sincere, cordial and open dialogue with the delegate that has been named, Archbishop Sartain. That certainly has not happened so far.

I know they feel there's a lot of uncertainty about what response they should give, and they're a membership organization, so they have to talk to their board and so forth. But I think that [a dialogue with Sartain] would be a sign of a response that wants to find whatever is good in the implementation of this assessment, and I think it would be the beginning of a real opportunity to look at things not as you want them to be, but as they are, and to take the steps necessary to improve them.

Realistically, do you think LCWR can become what your assessment envisions?

I think so, absolutely. That's my hope and prayer. It has the elements of concreteness that I believe are part of the American genius for practicality, and I think it can work.

Is there any other point you would like to make?

I'd like to say a word about obedience. In the church, the pope is the superior, ultimately, and obedience has been an integral part of the evangelical counsels and of religious life from the beginning. This process is also an invitation to obedience for the sisters in LCWR as representatives of their groups. They call their own sisters to obedience when they need to, and that's an appeal I would want to make to them now, to look at this as a deeper living out of their own vowed life and the vow of obedience.

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