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Three key points from LCWR leader's NPR interview

Joshua J. McElwee | Jul. 18, 2012 NCR Today

During an interview on the public radio program "Fresh Air" Tuesday, the head of the group of U.S. sisters which has come under harsh Vatican scrutiny addressed at length some of the hierarchical church's concerns with her group.

Explaining her viewpoint on some of the issues for the first time, Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell used blunt language several times -- even calling part of the Vatican's critique of her group, which represents some 80 percent of U.S. women religious, "very distorted."

Those criticisms, of course, stem from an April 18 document from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that ordered LCWR to revise and place itself under the authority of three bishops [1].

While Farrell addressed a bevy of things during her interview, here are three key areas of the Vatican's criticism of the group which Farrell addressed at length yesterday.

For her full comments, be sure to check out the radio interview [2] and even the transcript [3].

1. **Women religious "moving beyond" the church or Jesus**

   In its assessment of the LCWR, the Vatican Congregation pointed specifically to an address made at the group's annual assembly in 2007 that it said was a "serious source of concern."

   That address, given by Dominican Sr. Laurie Brink, focused on how some religious are viewing their vocations. The Vatican assessment pointed specifically to one portion of the address, where Brink mentioned that some women religious were "moving beyond the church." It said that represented a "rejection of faith" and is incompatible with religious life.

   In her interview Tuesday, Farrell said her group chose not to specifically address that allegation following the Vatican's assessment so they could wait to discuss the issue with the Congregation, which they did at a meeting in Rome with the then-head of the Congregation, Cardinal William Levada. [4]

   Farrell also said she thought that was a "very distorted quotation" as it only represented a portion of Brink's address, which also addressed other ways in which religious see their vocations.

   The congregation, said Farrell, "talks about that statement as a phenomenological snapshot of religious life today. And I have to say that is a very serious distortion. And to somehow suggest that the majority of women religious in the United States are beyond Jesus and beyond the church is a very egregious comment and a very serious distortion.

"And we talked at length about that when we went back to Rome because that does not represent our life."

2. **Women's ordination**

   In its assessment, the Vatican also pointed to the fact that in 1977 the LCWR publicly called for the ordination of women to the priesthood.

   Farrell said Tuesday that that public statement came "before there was a Vatican letter saying that there is a definitive church position against the ordination of women."

   "When that declaration came out, the response of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious was to call for a nationwide time of prayer and fasting for all women religious in response to that because our deep desire for places of leadership for women in the church be open remains a desire," Farrell continued.

   "Since then the leadership conference has not spoken publicly about the ordination of women."

3. **Radical feminism**

   Perhaps the most quoted phrase from the Vatican assessment is its argument that the LCWR represents a sort of "radical feminism." There's a "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith in some of the programs and presentations sponsored by the LCWR," it reads.

   Farrell said that what she hears in that accusation is "a fear of women's position in the church."

   "We've had speakers who've talked about the more feminine dimensions in God," said Farrell.

   "God has no gender. But traditionally all of our language about God has been in masculine terms. And so I think when - if the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith calls that kind of sincere investigation into our church formulation with a masculine bias, if it calls that radical feminism, I find that a polarizing way of talking about it, which sounds a little fear-based to me."

UPDATE: Just after posting this blog, Jesuit Fr. Robert Araujo, a professor at Loyola University Chicago's School of Law, posted his own analysis of several of Farrell's points over at the Mirror of Justice blog [5].

You may want to see his analysis as well, which emphasizes different points.

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