NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

LCWR 'gathers collective wisdom' of members to discern next steps

Joshua J. McElwee | Aug. 8, 2012

ST. LOUIS -- The much-anticipated gathering of 900 U.S. Catholic sisters who make up the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) opened here Tuesday night with song, prayer, and references big, small, and in-between to the Vatican?s attempted take-over of the group.

References to the Vatican?s critique of the group, which came in an April 18 announcement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, came early in the two-hour event, with LCWR president Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell telling the assembled that ?we don?t have to remind you that our gathering this week is an historic time in the life of this organization.?

The opening of the annual assembly of LCWR, which represents some 80 percent of U.S. women religious, also included a welcome by St. Louis Archbishop Robert Carlson and details about how the group?s members would discern steps forward during the gathering, which continues through Friday night.

In its April critique, the Vatican congregation identified a "prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" in the group's programs and "corporate dissent" in the group regarding the church's sexual teachings.

In a statement June 1, LCWR's national board criticized the Vatican's move, saying it was "based on unsubstantiated accusations and the result of a flawed process that lacked transparency."

According to the Vatican's mandate, LCWR is to place itself under the authority of Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain, who is to serve as "archbishop delegate" for the group and is to be assisted in that role by Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, and Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill.

During an address Tuesday night, Farrell outlined the process by which the group?s members would discuss the Vatican?s mandate in their gathering, saying they want to ?gather the collective wisdom of this group to make a response that we hope can be for the good of the church, for the good of LCWR, for the good of religious life throughout the world, and ultimately for the good of the human family.?

Starting Wednesday, LCWR is to host a number of closed door ?executive sessions? where members are to discuss the Vatican mandate.

Those meetings, said Farrell, will involve a process ?that will be sort of like a seamless garment of discernment.?

?Each individual executive session will have something of contemplative rhythm, something of discussion together,? Farrell continued. ?But all of this hopefully will continue unfold as another, and then another, step in an ongoing process.?

?The goal is not to come away from this assembly with a well-developed plan, or not even perhaps with a decision. Our only hope is that as we touch in to the collective wisdom that is here that we can at least discern

whatever is the next best step. Maybe we will discover several next best steps, but at least we will try and find together one next step we can take.?

Farrell also mentioned that following the closure of the LCWR assembly Saturday the group?s national board will also meet on its own Sunday morning. Part of that session she said, will include a meeting with Sartain ?for the very first conversation that really he?s had with us in any official way? so that ?we can communicate with him something of a direction that comes from this group.?

?I suspect that we?re in for a lot of surprises, and a lot of rich moments together,? Farrell ended her remarks.

Before Farrell?s address, St. Louis Archbishop Robert Carlson welcomed the group to the city, mentioning that he?s been ?very fortunate my entire life to work with a whole variety of religious communities? and that he?s ?come to know you as very dedicated women religious who minister and serve everyday here in the archdiocese of St. Louis and around our country and beyond.?

Referencing the Vatican?s mandate to LCWR, Carlson also said that he hoped dialogue between the group and the Vatican ?is not politicized, but during this meeting worked out in the community of faith.?

Citing arguments between those who held different views on issues confronting the church during the First Council of Jerusalem, held around the year 50, and naming specifically saints Peter and Paul, Carlson continued: ?They managed to work out things then and I pray you can work out things now.?

About midway through the gathering Tuesday night, LCWR also individually recognized a number of representatives of national and international institutes represented at the event.

Included in those recognized were a number of heads of international federations of religious orders; a representative from CLAR, the Latin American Confederation of Religious; the head of the group which represents U.S. men religious, Conference of major Superiors of Men president Trinity Fr. John Edmunds; and a representative from the Vatican?s Congregation for Religious, Oblate Fr. Hank Lemoncelli.

That congregation, officially known as the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, is the group that ordered a separate Vatican investigation of individual congregations of U.S. women's orders, called an ?apostolic visitiation.? A report on that investigation was submitted to Rome in January.

Speaking to *NCR* following the opening ceremony, Lemoncelli said a representative from that Vatican congregation ?comes every year.?

As part of the opening, each of the some 900 sisters was asked to write down both their fears and their ?hope or hopes? as they come to the assembly and then to discuss those at their table groups.

Overheard among the responses was one sister who said she was afraid she would be ?too emotional? about the Vatican?s critique to discuss it thoughtfully. Another expressed a fear that no matter what the sisters say, ?we won?t be listened to.?

During the opening ceremony, the sisters also recognized two among them who had passed away in the last year. One of those was School Sister of Notre Dame Sr. Jane Burke, who had served as LCWR?s executive director from 2008-11.

A presenter describing Burke?s work with LCWR said she particularly focused on developing several initiatives aimed at helping its member congregations discern the future of religious life.

The presenter read from Burke?s reflection in LCWR?s 2011 annual report, where the sister wondered: ?I find within myself some concerns about our openness in giving ourselves the time it takes to perceive what God is doing among us, about how we will know for certain that we have uncovered the new, and about knowing when it is the right time to act.

?I wonder if we will have the discipline needed to take the time needed, God?s time, to free ourselves to proceed and to let the new rise up within us.?

Following the presentation of the departed, a chorus led the group in song. Part of the refrain: ?Goodbye my friend, goodbye for now/Your life has been a gift to all/Your memory will walk within.?

Towards the end of the opening meeting Tuesday, the sisters presented a number of the mission and vision statements of the different congregations represented in LCWR.

Among those highlighted, followed by portions of their statements, were:

- The School Sisters of Notre Dame: ?Directing our entire lives toward that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent,?
- The Adrian Dominican Sisters: ?Women called together to share faith and life with one another and sent in our world to be with others bearers and recipients of his love, co-creators of his justice and peace,? and,
- The Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception: ?Sharing mission in compassion.?

Ending the evening with an invocation of the Holy Spirit, the sisters prayed: ?We abandon ourselves into your hands, O God. Keep our hearts soft and our minds open, as we wait for the truth of this moment to reveal itself.?

Continuing Wednesday morning, the LCWR gathering is to see a keynote address by Barbara Marx Hubbard, an author known for her advancement of a worldview called "conscious evolution."

Also on the agenda of the LCWR assembly are NCR publisher Tom Fox and NCR columnist Jamie Manson, who will share a panel discussion Thursday with Sr. Jennifer Gordon, a member of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kan., to discuss "Religious Life in the Future: What Might It Look Like?"

During the assembly, LCWR will also hold its annual transition of the group's top leaders -- their president-elect, president and past president -- who govern LCWR collaboratively with the group's secretary, treasurer and executive director.

During a formal ceremony set for Friday afternoon, the current head of the group, Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, will move to the position of past president, while Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, currently LCWR's president-elect, will become its president.

Deacon, who is also the congregational leader of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi based in St. Francis, Wis., previously served at the United Nations as director of the New York office of Franciscans International, a nongovernmental organization that lobbies for justice issues.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

NCR will be reporting on the LCWR assembly all week. Previous reports:

- **Outside LCWR meeting, victims allege abuse by sisters** [1], Aug. 9
- **Keynote: LCWR 'seed bed' for 21st century** [2], Aug. 8
- **LCWR 'gathers collective wisdom' of members to discern next steps** [3], Aug. 8
- **LCWR past presidents reflect on Vatican mandate** [4], Aug. 7
- **LCWR to determine course at next week's annual meeting** [5], July 31

For related commentary see:

- **The Vatican, LCWR, and Definitions of Dialogue** [6] By Kevin Aschenbrenner
- **What LCWR teaches us about church leadership** [7] By Jamie L. Manson
- **Are these sisters dangerous women?** [8] By Patrick T. Reardon
- **The Second Vatican Council has already made us free** [9] By Robert Blair Kaiser

---

Source URL (retrieved on *12/11/2013 - 20:25*): http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/lcwr-gathers-collective-wisdom-members-discern-next-steps

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/31645
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/31636
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/31628
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/31624
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/31497
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/31629
[7] http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/what-lcwr-teaches-us-about-church-leadership
[8] http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/are-these-sisters-dangerous-women
[9] http://ncronline.org/news/second-vatican-council-has-already-made-us-free