

## Vatican cardinal criticises the way LCWR reform was handled



The head of the Vatican's department for religious life has said that dialogue has been missing from the Vatican-ordered reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Brazilian Cardinal Joao Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, said that should change in future.

“It is not a matter of ‘We’re right and they’re wrong’, but of believing it is possible to have a dialogue, something which did not take place previously,” the cardinal said, in a rare criticism of another Vatican official. He spoke after celebrating Mass with and answering questions from some 800 superiors of women’s religious orders from 76 countries.

“The positions are very different; there’s also a programme to complete, but don’t exclude dialogue,” the cardinal said in a video interview posted on Vidimus Dominum, a news website operated by the women’s and men’s international unions of superiors.

The Maryland-based LCWR is a Vatican-recognised group that includes about 1,500 leaders of US women’s religious communities, representing about 80 per cent of the country’s 57,000 women religious. In April 2012, the Vatican ordered a major reform of the organisation, citing “serious doctrinal problems which affect many in consecrated life”.

During an April meeting with LCWR officers, Archbishop Gerhard Muller, prefect of the doctrinal congregation, said he had “recently discussed the doctrinal assessment with Pope Francis, who reaffirmed the findings of the assessment and the programme of reform for this conference of major superiors”.

At the May 3-7 plenary assembly of the International Union of Superiors General in Rome, a group that includes many LCWR members, Franciscan Sister Florence Deacon, president of the US group, spoke about discussions with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

According to a transcript posted by the National Catholic Reporter, she told the sisters the Vatican’s assessment “was very flawed and did not reflect our own lived experience”. She said the assessment shows “there is serious misunderstanding between officials of the Vatican and women religious, and the need for prayer, discernment and deep listening”.

In his homily at Mass with the women superiors, Cardinal Braz de Aviz spoke about the painful differences of opinion among the early Christians over what was required of pagans who wanted to join the Church. The matter was resolved through a dialogue in a spirit of prayer and an invocation of the Holy Spirit, he said.

“This is what we always must do in the Church; we must constantly discern in order to move forward,” he said. It is essential “to have this constant dialogue about our lives as consecrated men and women and as people who live and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus”.

In the video interview later, he said, “All of us who have power in the church — mothers general, fathers general, cardinals, bishops — must rethink how we act” and whether “our power is authentic, or is it domination?”

The focus of the plenary assembly of the International Union of Superiors was on exercising leadership in religious communities in accordance with the Gospel.

Cardinal Braz de Aviz said retired Pope Benedict XVI gave the Church valuable lessons on leadership and authority. “He said we don’t need a lot of power, we need the Lord in our midst. And Pope

Francis is doing the same thing — he doesn't just want to be a powerful man, but wants to build something together.”

The cardinal spent more than 90 minutes answering questions from the sisters and then spent time answering reporters' questions.

Vidimus Dominum, the website of the international superiors, posted a National Catholic Reporter article about the cardinal's response to questions. It quoted Cardinal Braz de Aviz as telling the sisters that the doctrinal congregation's judgment about the LCWR was reached without discussions with his office and cause him “much pain.”

“We have to change this way of doing things,” the cardinal said. “We have to improve these relationships.”

The cardinal said officials in the Vatican need to talk to each other and discuss how to handle issues that involve the competency of more than one congregation.

“Cardinals can't be mistrustful of each other,” he said. “This is not the way the Church should function.”

The cardinal told the Sisters that he “didn't have the courage to speak” out previously. While it is unusual for one Vatican official to question the work of another, during meetings that preceded the election of Pope Francis, many cardinals — not just those working in the curia — insisted on the need to reorganise and reform the Roman Curia, precisely to increase communication among offices.

Returning to the theme of authority and leadership, which he had touched on in his homily, Cardinal Braz de Aviz said: “Authority that commands, kills. Obedience that becomes a copy of what the other person says, infantilises.”

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