

Vatican's doctrinal head lambasts US sisters for disobedience



Catholic nuns in the U.S. have been thumbing their nose at Rome's demands to toe the doctrinal line and they need to obey or face serious consequences, the Vatican's enforcer of orthodoxy said in a surprisingly tough talk to women representing most American sisters.

"The Holy See believes that the charismatic vitality of religious life can only flourish within the ecclesial faith of the church," Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, told four members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Mueller said the LCWR — which represents about 80 percent of the more than 50,000 Catholic nuns in the U.S. — is dependent on the Vatican for its bona fides as a church body. He indicated that the group's status, and the Catholic faith of the sisters, was at risk if they did not heed Rome's directives.

"Canonical status and ecclesial vision go hand-in-hand, and at this phase ... we are looking for a clearer expression of that ecclesial vision and more substantive signs of collaboration," Mueller said.

Mueller's talk was dated April 30, apparently at the opening of talks with the four LCWR leaders; it was published by the Vatican on Monday (May 5).

The cardinal twice acknowledged that his talk was "blunt," and indeed his remarks were the toughest

since the Vatican takeover of LCWR was announced in 2012. “What I must say is too important to dress up in flowery language,” he said at one point.

While his comments seemed to reverse expectations that the crisis was on the way toward a resolution, the LCWR leaders who met with Mueller appeared to downplay the impact of the cardinal’s criticisms.

“As articulated in the cardinal’s statement, these remarks were meant to set a context for the discussion that followed,” the sisters said Monday from Rome, where they are holding talks with Vatican officials.

“The actual interaction with Cardinal Mueller and his staff was an experience of dialogue that was respectful and engaging,” they added. The LCWR leaders — Sisters Carol Zinn, Florence Deacon, Sharon Holland and Janet Mock — declined all interview requests.

When the Vatican censure was announced, both Rome and American bishops took a lot of heat from Catholics and the wider public, who embraced the nuns and bristled at the takeover.

Rome justified the move as necessary to ensure the group’s orthodoxy. The Vatican accused the sisters of being too focused on social justice work, and said they did not sufficiently promote church orthodoxy, especially on issues like gay marriage and abortion.

The Vatican appointed three U.S. bishops, led by Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain, to have final say on speakers at the LCWR’s annual meeting and approval over other matters.

As some American bishops worked behind the scenes to ease the tensions with the sisters, Pope Francis’ election last year also seemed to signal a detente. As a Jesuit, Francis is a member of a religious order himself and has often expressed solidarity with other religious orders of men and women.

Last June, he told a group of priests and sisters from Latin America not to worry too much if they get a critical letter from Mueller's office, but to deal with it and move on. The pope also retained officials at Vatican congregations who are seen as more sympathetic to the LCWR.

But Francis also kept on Mueller, who was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI soon after the action against the LCWR was unveiled. The cardinal told the nuns that he was particularly upset by two developments:

One was the LCWR's ongoing focus on a topic called "conscious evolution," which was the subject of the LCWR's annual conference two years ago. In Rome, it's seen as a nebulous, New Age-sounding concept of spiritual development that critics say is unmoored from traditional Christian doctrine.

"The fundamental theses of Conscious Evolution are opposed to Christian Revelation and, when taken unreflectively, lead almost necessarily to fundamental errors," Mueller said, warning that the American nuns were straying from the basics of the faith and from the Catholic Church itself.

A second point of contention, Mueller said, is that the LCWR is honoring a prominent Catholic theologian, Sister Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University, at this year's conference in August despite the fact that one of Johnson's recent books was challenged by the U.S. bishops as straying from accepted doctrine.

Johnson vigorously rejected those charges — and was supported by a broad swath of the Catholic theological guild — as she sought to engage the bishops in discussions. But the overture was rejected.

The choice to honor Johnson without Sartain's approval, Mueller said, "will be seen as a rather open provocation against the Holy See. ... Not only that, but it further alienates the LCWR from the bishops as well."

David Gibson - Religion News Service