

US nuns' relief that the Vatican's investigation fizzled out

For those who watch the Vatican closely – and I am not usually one of them – two hints appeared late in 2014 that a resolution to the “doctrinal assessment” of America’s Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) was close at hand.



The first came in an interview with Sean Cardinal O’Malley of Boston, broadcast on the US newsweekly 60 Minutes on 16 November, in which the prelate declared the inquiry to be a “disaster”. As the only American member of Pope Francis’ “C8” advisory council, and a vowed Religious himself, O’Malley’s remarks inevitably were heard as more than personal opinion and as a clue that those at the highest levels of church leadership wanted the controversy to go away.

Sr Sharon Holland at VaticanOne month later, in a globally broadcast press conference from Rome that many observers characterised as a “lovefest,” officials of the Congregation for Religious (CICLSAL) and leaders of both LCWR and the more conservative Consortium of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) announced an end to the separate but simultaneous Apostolic Visitation of US women’s congregations. As an aside to her remarks that day, LCWR President Sr Sharon Holland, IHM, declared that she anticipated the doctrinal assessment would conclude “sooner rather than later”.

Both O’Malley and Holland were proven to be prescient last week when, on 16 April – four months to the day after the Visitation report was issued – the leaders of LCWR flew to Rome for the release of a

statement calling the oversight of LCWR to an end. In the presence of both Gerhard Cardinal Müller, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain (who chaired the three-man team charged with “overseeing” the sisters’ umbrella group), a brief report was issued; later that day, the LCWR leaders met with Pope Francis himself (a first for LCWR).

The report itself was brief. The sisters agreed to have “competent theologians” review their publications, assembly speakers, and award recipients— but there is nothing to suggest that these authorities cannot be chosen by LCWR, perhaps from among their own members. The conference also adopted (last August, at the annual meeting of its membership) a new bye-law emphasising the centrality of the teachings of Jesus and of the Church to their mission and ministries. There was no indication that these had not been central in the past, or that anything specific needed to be changed.

Both the prelates and the sisters have agreed to a 30-day period of silence, while many questions about specifics necessarily remain unanswered. And, to be sure, the “devil may be in the details” – details that will take some time to be illuminated. As of now, however, most observers agree that the ill-advised investigation begun under the previous pontificate, and at the initiative of then-head of the CDF, William Cardinal Levada (another American), ended with a whimper rather than a bang – something that current Vatican leaders, up to the highest levels, unquestionably desired, and that most women religious in the US greeted with relief, if not jubilation.

But an equally important takeaway is the widespread admiration expressed by so many for the sisters during the six-year ordeal. While some, especially in the press, were frustrated by their unwillingness to speak publicly and by their general restraint, what became clear over the years were the constancy, prayerfulness and commitment with which these American sisters continued to conduct themselves, even as their very integrity and autonomy were being challenged.

What a difference a (change of) Pope makes, yes—but what a difference a group of remarkable sisters, confident in their collective collaboration and contemplative strength has made, as well. Together, they have taught the Church a lesson about the ongoing reality of the Way of the Cross and, importantly, what follows in its aftermath.

Margaret Susan Thompson is Professor of History at the Maxwell School, Syracuse University, New York

Professor Margaret Susan Thompson - The Tablet