

The Church and the Sisters: What Is Really Happening?

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The standard media account about the CDF and LCWR lacks essential information and historical background

Ann Carey



Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle and Sister Janet Mock, executive director of LCWR. (CNS photos/Mike Penney/Bob Roller)

From the moment the United States Bishops announced on April 18 that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) had issued a document ordering a supervised renewal of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), confusion and misinformation about the initiative have run rampant.

Sensational headlines have appeared, such as: “Nuns Gone Wild! Vatican Chastises American Sisters” (Daily Beast, April 20), “Vatican waging a war on nuns” (Chicago Sun Times, April 20) and “Guess Who the Vatican Is Picking on Now ...” (Philly Post, April 23).

The common theme in most media reports about the CDF initiative, as these headlines suggest, is that out-of-touch men in the Vatican are unfairly criticizing the most faithful and hard-working members of

the Church—the sisters. So, is this really the case? Hardly.

On page one of the eight-page CDF document, the accomplishments of women religious are cited and praised: “The Holy See acknowledges with gratitude the great contribution of women Religious to the Church in the United States”

However, the document goes on to point out that vowed religious are much more than social workers: they are consecrated persons who have a special place in the Church that must be marked by a strong faith and allegiance to Church authority. The LCWR, it continued, has shown a “diminution of the fundamental Christological center and focus of religious consecration which leads, in turn, to a loss of a ‘constant and lively sense of the Church’ among some religious.”

Additionally, the CDF document emphasizes that the initiative is addressed only to the LCWR, a 1,500-member organization to which many leaders of women’s religious orders belong. The initiative is not directed to the other 54,000 sisters in the United States who do not belong to the LCWR, though press reports have tended to confuse this point and characterize all sisters as members of the LCWR.

This is quite incorrect, and many sisters who are in LCWR-related orders have contacted this writer to emphasize that they have neither membership, voice or vote in the LCWR, and they do not appreciate being associated with the organization. In fact, many sisters in LCWR-related orders are quite pleased about the CDF action. As one such sister wrote in an e-mail: “I am so grateful to Pope Benedict and to all in Rome and in the USA who have contributed to this resolution. It has been a long nightmare and a severe cross for 40-plus years!”

A 40-year “nightmare”

What have this “nightmare” and “cross” involved? In the 1950s, the Vatican asked religious superiors all over the world to organize themselves into national conferences under the direction of the Holy See. The idea was to help religious leaders network with each other to improve their orders and to facilitate communication and cooperation with Church authorities. Thus, the Conference of Major Religious Superiors of Women’s Institutes was canonically established in 1959.

However, in 1971, the women's conference led a version of renewal of religious life that went far beyond anything envisioned by the Second Vatican Council, which had asked religious orders to discard outdated customs and to adapt their apostolate to modern needs, not to change the very nature of religious life.

At its 1971 annual assembly, the LCWR changed its statutes, its purpose and its name without Vatican approval, thus beginning 40 years of conflict with the Vatican. The Vatican insisted on changes to the new bylaws, to acknowledge the authority of the bishops and the Holy See. The Vatican also took three years to approve the name change, and only then said the new name should be accompanied by a sentence giving the original name.

Two sisters who had been executive directors of the LCWR for the 14 years between 1972 and 1986 wrote a book describing this metamorphosis of the conference: *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Temple University Press, 1992). The authors, Sisters Lora Ann Quinonez, CDP, and Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN, wrote:

The newly-adopted bylaws and title signaled a transformed understanding and appreciation of the *raison d'être* of the conference; not only was it to be a forum for enabling leadership, it was also to become a corporate force for systemic change in Church and society.

As the book's authors went on to note, this transformation of the conference caused conflicts with Church authorities and other sisters that centered around the nature of religious life and relations with ecclesiastical authority. These conflicts in turn filtered down to the orders led by LCWR members who were heavily influenced by the LCWR agenda that has insisted on the right to "loyal dissent."

The transformed LCWR

Over the years, Catholic liturgies at LCWR meetings and assemblies were edged out in favor of New Age rituals and para-liturgies led by women. Workshops and speakers tended to focus on social and political issues rather than ecclesial, as evidenced by the resolutions passed at the 2000 LCWR assembly: To work for legislation to bring people out of poverty; for better working conditions for laborers in factories along the U.S.-Mexico border; and support for a "global peace force."

Speakers at annual assemblies and LCWR publications often questioned the authority of the hierarchy. In a 2000 National Board report, vice-president Sister Mary Mollison, CSA, wrote about “talking points” developed by the LCWR to “‘initiate conversations with official leaders’ at all levels of the Church ‘to address the exercise of ecclesiastical authority experienced as a source of suffering and division by many within the Catholic community.’”

Further, the conference seemed preoccupied with transforming religious life. The LCWR Annual Report for 2006-2007 recalled that speakers at the 2006 assembly “spoke of this moment as a new era in religious life, a time for creative thinking, a time for envisioning consecrated life in ways previously not imagined.”

Attempts at reform

Indeed, the Vatican and some bishops tried for years to get the LCWR and its members to adhere to canon law and the essentials of religious life, but these efforts were rebuffed by LCWR leaders. For instance, in 1971, Pope Paul VI issued the apostolic exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio*, giving his observations about how religious orders were renewing themselves. While he praised religious for their dedication, he also noted that some religious orders were not adhering to norms of religious life. The LCWR reacted by publishing *Widening the Dialogue*, a 1972 book of essays critical of the apostolic exhortation. The essays from that book were then used in LCWR workshops for sisters. Similarly, the LCWR dismissed a 1983 document from the Congregation for Religious that detailed canonical norms for religious life.

The LCWR also adopted the technique of deflecting criticism of its activities and philosophy by reminding critics of all the good works sisters have done, and many in the media have looked no further than noting the sisters’ accomplishments. What is often missed is the fact that sisters were able to accomplish all they did because the traditional way of religious life—daily prayer and life in common, a corporate apostolate, strong adherence to the teachings of the Church, and close cooperation with bishops—enabled their ministries. However, many orders influenced by the LCWR have changed that traditional way of religious life in favor of individual ministries, small or single living units, independent prayer, and distancing from Church authority.

The LCWR also became adept at neutralizing criticism by prolonging “dialogue” so that conclusions were never reached. And it embraced the concept of instructing Church authorities. As then-LCWR president Sister Nancy Sylvester, IHM, wrote in her 2000 President’s Report: “We free ourselves to offer such insights to our brother bishops and invite them to see anew some of the official teachings of

our church.”

Like the headlines of today, efforts over the years by Church authorities to encourage religious orders to reform themselves aroused sensational media charges of hierarchal “patriarchy” and “misogyny” and headlines like “Battling for ‘Nuns’ Rights” (Newsweek, Sept. 8, 1969) and “American sisters of 1980s look beyond ‘Roman roulette’ to bigger challenges” (National Catholic Reporter, Feb. 27, 1981).

Meanwhile, doctrinal difficulties and defiance of Church authorities continued. For example, in 1985, the LCWR invited Sister Margaret Farley, RSM, to be the featured speaker at its annual assembly, even though she had signed the New York Times 1984 statement sponsored by Catholics for a Free Choice that claimed there was more than one legitimate Catholic position on abortion. The U.S. Bishops and the Vatican asked the LCWR to withdraw the Farley invitation, but it refused, so Archbishops John Quinn of San Francisco and Pio Laghi, apostolic delegate, cancelled their scheduled appearance at the assembly, where they also had been invited to speak. Similar problems arose over the years on life issues and sexual morality.

The LCWR splits

The transformation of the superiors’ conference, which moved the organization away from Church authority and the traditional models of religious life to emphasize political, justice, and liberation issues, caused some sisters to leave the conference in the early 1970s and form their own small group of superiors. The Vatican tried for years to reconcile the women superiors, but finally concluded this was impossible, and canonically erected another group of women’s superiors in 1992, the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) for superiors of orders that have retained a more traditional style of religious life and close ties with the institutional Church.

Currently, the superiors in the CMSWR lead orders with about 8,000 members, and the LCWR members lead orders with about 48,000 sisters. (A few superiors of women belong to neither group, and some belong to both). Even though CMSWR members represent fewer sisters, CMSWR communities are receiving the majority of new vocations and have an average age in the 30s, whereas the average age in LCWR-related communities is in the 70s.

A 2009 study on “Recent Vocations to Religious Life” by the Center for Applied Research in the

Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University found that young people prefer the “more traditional lifestyle of religious life” in which members live and pray in community, work in a common apostolate, wear religious garb and “are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium.” (See "The CARA Study and Vocations", Catholic World Report, May, 2011.)

The CDF initiative

Even with the aging of their communities, many members of the LCWR have continued to support the LCWR agenda that has often brought it into conflict with Church authorities. Other members who may not be as supportive of that agenda have maintained membership to take advantage of resources provided by the LCWR.

However, many of those resources have been named as problematic in the CDF document, which was quite comprehensive in delineating “serious doctrinal problems which affect many in Consecrated Life,” such as a distortion of the role of Jesus in the salvation of the world and undermining “the revealed doctrines of the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the inspiration of Sacred Scripture.” The document also noted a rejection of the faith and Church authority and unacceptable positions on women’s ordination, ministry to homosexual persons, and human sexuality, as well as inadequate presentation of the life issues.

The CDF document cited canon law, which governs superiors’ conferences, and said, “It is clear that greater emphasis needs to be placed both on the relationship of the LCWR with the conference of Bishops, and on the need to provide a sound doctrinal foundation in the faith of the Church.”

In order to “implement a process of review and conformity to the teachings and discipline of the Church,” the CDF named Archbishop Peter Sartain of Seattle as apostolic delegate, to be assisted by Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, a civil and canon lawyer, and Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, a member of the U.S. Bishops Committee on Doctrine who conducted the doctrinal assessment of the LCWR.

Assisted by an advisory team of his choice, Archbishop Sartain was directed to spend up to five years seeing that:

- the LCWR establishes a formal link with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops;

- the LCWR statutes are revised to reflect clarity about the scope of the mission and responsibilities of the conference;
- LCWR publications are reviewed and revised where necessary and speakers at future programs be approved by the delegate;
- LCWR future programs be developed to provide a deeper understanding of the faith;
- LCWR events and programs are given review and guidance to insure a proper place for the Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours;
- LCWR links with the organizations Network and Resource Center for Religious are reviewed.

How will the LCWR react?

The LCWR “presidency” (past president, current president and president-elect) posted a brief statement on the LCWR website soon after the CDF document was released, saying they were “stunned by the conclusions of the doctrinal assessment of LCWR by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Because the leadership of LCWR has the custom of meeting annually with the staff of CDF in Rome and because the conference follows canonically-approved statutes, we were taken by surprise.” The statement also said the LCWR board would meet within the month to “review the mandate and prepare a response.”

However, it seems that while the contents of the CDF document may have been a surprise, the fact that the sisters would receive it at their annual visit to the CDF was not really a surprise. The second sentence of that LCWR website statement was changed a day or so later to read: “We had received a letter from the CDF prefect in early March informing us that we would hear the results of the doctrinal assessment at our annual meeting; however, we were taken by surprise by the gravity of the mandate.” No explanation was given for the amended statement.

Thus, while the sisters might have been “stunned” by the contents of the document, they had no reason to be surprised that it was coming. Additionally, the LCWR had been given a “doctrinal warning” by the CDF in 2001 to correct doctrinal problems. When no progress had been made in seven years, the CDF told the LCWR in 2008 that it would undertake the doctrinal assessment. Thus, eleven years passed between the first warning and the issuance of the CDF directive.

Now speculation rages about how the LCWR will react. Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, a former president

of the LCWR (1976), told the National Catholic Reporter that to remain true to themselves, the LCWR members should simply “disband canonically and regroup as an unofficial interest group.” However, if that occurs, that secular group would become just one of many secular professional organizations, and would certainly lose much of its credibility among women religious.

On the other hand, it remains to be seen whether there are enough moderate members of the LCWR who want to keep the organization afloat and work with Archbishop Sartain and his team to reform and renew as a legitimate superiors' conference.

On April 25, the LCWR presidency announced that the LCWR board would meet May 29 to June 1 to discuss the CDF mandate “in an atmosphere of prayer, contemplation and dialogue and will develop a plan to involve LCWR membership in similar processes. The conference plans to move slowly, not rushing to judgment.”

No doubt intense and lively conversations will be taking place within the LCWR in the next few weeks.

Ann Carey is the author of Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women's Religious Communities.

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