

Annual Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the USA



As the largest leadership organization for U.S. women religious prepares to gather for four days in Nashville, Tenn., Aug. 12-16, the group appears to stand on a precipice.

But what lies on either side or what path the membership will choose to follow, no one can say.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious has been under the shadow of a Vatican-ordered doctrinal assessment since 2009. Following the investigation in 2012, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ordered it to reform its statutes and appointed a bishop to oversee changes.

Now, the situation is starker: In April, Cardinal Gerhard Müller, prefect of the congregation, ordered that after this assembly, speakers at the group's events must be approved by Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, who heads the five-year reform agenda for LCWR.

But will LCWR members choose to follow Müller's edict that Sartain have approval power over speakers at major events? Or will the group decide to stick to its contention that the sanctions are "disproportionate to the concerns raised and compromised the organization's ability to fulfill its mission"?

rectangular-logo.jpg Visit our new website, Global Sisters Report!

Related: Resources for the 2014 LCWR assembly

LCWR -- which represents about 80 percent of sisters in the United States -- uses a collaborative structure, so the members will discuss the issues and decide whether to vote and what to vote on. Members could choose to do nothing.

"I can't imagine what's going to happen," said Marian Ronan, a research professor of Catholic studies at New York Theological Seminary and author of *Sister Trouble: The Vatican, the Bishops, and the Nuns*. "But I also can't imagine they won't try to find some way to get around [the mandate] rather than confront it."

The stakes are high: Müller's address to the leadership in April hinted that without cooperation and reform, LCWR could lose its canonical status, a drastic step.

"On one hand, it's hard to imagine [the Vatican] going that far," Ronan said. "At the same time, you wonder what the point [of the organization] is if they're going to be so controlled?"

She said the biggest stumbling block is that the women religious are essentially powerless in this relationship.

"You can't dialogue with people who have control, who have all this power," Ronan said.

Former LCWR president Mercy Sr. Helen Marie Burns said it appears the group is truly attempting to discuss the issues with the doctrinal congregation.

"I admire deeply the steady, forthright manner with which LCWR has maintained in word and deed a stance of cooperation, restraint and honest communication," Burns said. "But I am continually dismayed by the inability of individuals in the various Roman congregations to listen deeply and to negotiate fairly."

Burns said she hopes the assembly will find a way to be true to its beliefs and itself.

"Hopefully, the congregational leaders who gather for the 2014 assembly will stand with the best of our Catholic tradition, choose life, and reject any relationship which comprises the integrity of its mission," she said.

NCR's Global Sisters Report contacted Sartain's office to ask what he expected from the assembly, but he declined to comment.

The assembly is scheduled to close Aug. 16 with a banquet at which St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson is to receive LCWR's Outstanding Leadership Award. Müller criticized LCWR's selection of Johnson, noting that she has been "criticized by the bishops of the United States because of the gravity of the doctrinal errors in [her] writings."

Johnson's selection, Müller said, "will be seen as a rather open provocation against the Holy See and the doctrinal assessment."

In 2011, the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said Johnson's 2007 book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, is not in accordance with official Catholic teaching and "completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in that Gospel."

Johnson, a noted theologian widely considered one of the architects of feminist theology, responded by saying the book does not say the things the panel claims it does.

"I am responsible for what I have said and written, and stand open to correction if this contradicts the faith," she wrote at the time. "But I am not willing to take responsibility for what *Quest* does not say and I do not think."

LCWR communications director Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Annmarie Sanders said that while

there is a certain amount of business that must be conducted, the point of the assembly is getting input and looking at the realities of Catholic religious life today. The conference's theme is "Holy Mystery Revealed in Our Midst."

"We're looking at discernment in a very fast-moving world," Sanders said. "How do you lead a discerning life? How to lead orders through this difficult time?"

Sanders said that despite the doctrinal assessment, which she declined to comment on, conference-goers always look forward to the event. "There's a great sense of solidarity among our members, and this is the one time a year they can be together with people in the same ministry," she said.

Franciscan Sr. Margaret Guider, an associate professor of missiology at Boston College who was vice president of her community during the Vatican's 2008-2010 apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious, said the assembly will continue the group's self-examination.

"I really think that this is not exactly a turning point. I think it's a point of really seeing how LCWR will go deeper in terms of its self-understanding with regards to its mission — past, present and future," Guider said. "I think there's a way in which the legacy of the past of LCWR can continue to inform and influence how Vatican officials may understand or interpret exactly what LCWR has been about and what it is about."

But it won't be easy.

"There's a way in which I'm not sure that the Vatican officials are fully understanding what LCWR is trying to do in 2014, not what it was doing in 1984," Guider said. "And I think there's a bit of a historical disconnect there, a sort of a 'stuckness' in time from external perspectives."

There is also the fact that women religious the world over are watching to see what happens here.

"The globalization of LCWR and of its members and of the members of the congregations represented just can't be underestimated," Guider said. "This is not just a question that pertains to the United States, but we're living, really, in the context of the world church. And what happens here or what happens in Brazil or what happens in South Africa or Lithuania, it has implications for what's happening for religious life in the church in the world."

[Dan Stockman and Dawn Cherie Araujo are staff writers for NCR's Global Sisters **Report.**]

Dan Stockman and Cherie Araujo