

Catholics rally around nuns amid Vatican crackdown

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c. 2012 Religion News Service CLEVELAND (RNS) Catholics around the U.S. are coming together for prayer vigils as a show of support for America's nuns, whom the Vatican accuses of having "serious doctrinal problems."

The Wednesday (May 30) vigil at St. Colman Catholic Church in Cleveland follows a Vatican move last month to intervene and reform the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an umbrella organization that represents the leaders of most U.S. nuns.

Similar rallies have already been held or are planned from Anchorage, Alaska to Boston, organized by the loose-knit Nun Justice Project, a coalition of lay reform groups.

The Vatican scolded the LCWR for making statements that "disagree with or challenge positions taken by the bishops, who are the church's authentic teachers of faith and morals."

The crackdown has caused an uproar among some Catholics, sparking dozens of vigils in cities across the country.

A Cleveland priest who has gone public with his support for the sisters says the Vatican action is an undeserved slap in the face to dedicated and educated women, and the anger it has created could trigger a major exodus from the pews.

"It's another event in which the people are disappointed in the leadership of the Catholic Church," said the Rev. Doug Koesel, pastor of Blessed Trinity Catholic Church in Cleveland. "This has the potential to be damaging to the church in the United States. Many Catholics have already walked away."

Koesel is encouraging his parishioners to attend the prayer vigil in support of the nuns. The event is being organized by FutureChurch, a national liberal group based in Lakewood, Ohio.

"The nuns were there for us. Let us be there for them," Koesel wrote in a weekly church bulletin. He said in an interview that the church hierarchy should be concentrating on issues that matter -- poverty, war, ecology -- "not investigating who's following what law."

The Vatican action follows the completion of two separate investigations -- launched by the Holy See in late 2008 and the spring of 2009 -- into the lifestyles, politics and doctrinal beliefs of American sisters.

One inquiry, known as a "visitation," ended in December, but its results have not been made public.

The other, known as a "doctrinal assessment," targeted the LCWR, an organization that claims 1,500 members representing more than 80 percent of the 57,000 Catholic sisters in the United States.

The assessment concluded the leadership conference has ignored various church doctrines and has pushed "certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith."

It said conference leaders have challenged church teachings on issues such as the prohibition of women priests and on "a correct pastoral approach to ministry to homosexual persons."

It added that the LCWR has worked hard to promote social justice issues but has remained silent on church concerns such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

The findings of the assessment, headed by Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, were presented in January 2011 to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, which then recommended to Pope Benedict XVI that the Vatican intervene to reform the American nuns' conference.

The pope agreed, and last month the Vatican panel appointed Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle to head the intervention. A spokesman said the archbishop had no immediate comment because he wants to meet first with the leadership conference.

"The problem with the Vatican approach," Koesel wrote in his church bulletin, "is that it places the nuns squarely on the side of Jesus and the Vatican on the side of tired old men."

Officials of the conference, based in Silver Spring, Md., have not responded publicly to the assessment and plan for reform. The conference notes in a statement on its website that it will discuss the matter during four days of meetings that began Tuesday (May 29).

"The conference plans to move slowly, not rushing to judgment," the statement reads. "We ask your prayer for us and for the church at this critical time."