

U.S. nuns strike a positive note on Vatican investigation

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ORLANDO, Fla. (RNS) U.S. Catholic nuns — accused by Rome of “radical feminism” for advocating social justice at the expense of issues such as abortion, gay marriage and euthanasia — responded to a Vatican knuckle rapping with a brief, conciliatory statement on Monday (Aug. 19).

After its four-day annual assembly, the board of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents 80 percent of the nation’s 57,000 sisters, emphasized the positive, and remained tight-lipped about negotiations to resolve the investigation.

Referring to closed sessions with Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, named by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to implement Rome’s “doctrinal assessment,” the sisters said:

“The session with Archbishop Sartain allowed a profound and honest sharing of views. ... Although we remain uncertain as to how our work with the bishop delegates will proceed, we maintain hope that continued conversations of this depth will lead to a resolution of this situation that maintains the integrity of LCWR and is healthy for the whole church.”

It’s unclear whether the nuns’ gentle words will be sufficient to turn away the wrath of the church’s hierarchy.

In brief public remarks, Sartain told the nuns he came to the gathering as a “brother and a friend.”

The Rev. Thomas Reese, a senior analyst for the National Catholic Reporter, said the tone was far less confrontational than in the past.

“Things could have been much worse after the meeting, and that clearly didn’t happen,” he said. “From their press release, they’re saying that things improved slightly — which is good news. Because both sides seemed to have listened and understood each other during the meeting.”

Initially, the nuns “didn’t feel that they were treated with respect, as adults,” Reese said. “Now it’s no longer a food fight. They’re talking; they’re having a conversation. It’s like couples counseling. ... That’s a big step forward from where they were in 2011.”

The controversy began in April 2011, when, under the direction of Pope Benedict XVI, leaders of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a “doctrinal assessment” of the LCWR, saying that the Vatican-chartered organization suffered from “a prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith.” The organization was put under the control of several Vatican appointees, ultimately led by Sartain.

Leaders of the LCWR were shocked by the public humiliation of the initial attack, which included criticism of some convention speeches that were more than 30 years old. Many observers noted that while the women’s orders had been largely untainted, the scandal over the sex abuse of minors by priests had done much to erode the male clergy’s moral authority.

In the wake of the Vatican’s action, there was an outpouring of support from the U.S. laity for the nuns’ work in the trenches as teachers, nurses, caregivers, as well as their tireless work on behalf of migrant workers, immigrants, the homeless, prison inmates, and people with disabilities.

“I’m continually stunned by the enormous support we received,” said Sister Mary Hughes, who served two terms as president of the LCWR. “I don’t think we realized the extent our lives have touched others.”

Even the hierarchy seemed to backpedal. In an August 2012 blogpost, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, proclaimed, “We Catholics love the sisters!”

After his election, Pope Francis reaffirmed the actions taken against the LCWR.

But the following month, Francis appeared to send a different signal when speaking to Latin American religious orders:

“They will make mistakes, they will make a blunder; this will pass! Perhaps even a letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine (of the Faith) will arrive for you, telling you such and such a thing. ... But do not worry. Explain whatever you have to explain, but move forward.”

Monday’s statement, hammered out after the convention at the Diocese of Orlando’s wooded retreat, was foreshadowed last week by the address of Sister Florence Deacon, the LCWR president, who met with Vatican officials in April. It was titled, “A Delicate Weaving.”

“Because of our experience sharing our gospel ministry with those on the margins, women religious have sometimes been to places the hierarchy could never go, and have seen things they could never see,” said Deacon. “At times our role as women of the gospel results in tension.”

The majority of the sisters, reflecting the demographic of Catholic women religious in the U.S., appeared to be white and middle-aged or older.

At the opening of the assembly, Deacon, who is also superior general of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi in St. Francis, Wis., added: “We are women of the church called on to expand perspectives to create a new reality which recognizes women’s identity, ability, mission and responsibility, both in the church and beyond.”