



CONGREGATIO
PRO DOCTRINA FIDEI

Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious

I. Introduction

The context in which the current doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States of America is best situated is articulated by Pope John Paul II in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* of 1996. Commenting on the genius of the charism of religious life in the Church, Pope John Paul says: *“In founders and foundresses we see a constant and lively sense of the Church, which they manifest by their full participation in all aspects of the Church’s life, and in their ready obedience to the Bishops and especially to the Roman Pontiff. Against this background of love towards Holy Church ‘the pillar and bulwark of truth’ (1 Tim 3:15), we readily understand...the full ecclesial communion which the Saints, founders and foundresses, have shared in diverse and often difficult times and circumstances. They are examples which consecrated persons need constantly to recall if they are to resist the particularly strong centrifugal and disruptive forces at work today. A distinctive aspect of ecclesial communion is allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium of the Bishops, an allegiance which must be lived honestly and clearly testified to before the People of God by all consecrated persons, especially those involved in theological research, teaching, publishing, catechesis and the use of the means of social communication. Because consecrated persons have a special place in the Church, their attitude in this regard is of immense importance for the whole People of God”* (n. 46).

The Holy See acknowledges with gratitude the great contribution of women Religious to the Church in the United States as seen particularly in the many schools, hospitals, and institutions of support for the poor which have been founded and staffed by Religious over the years. Pope John Paul II expressed this gratitude well in his meeting with Religious from the United States in San Francisco on September 17, 1987, when he said: *I rejoice because of your deep love of the Church and your generous service to God’s people...The extensive Catholic educational and health care systems, the highly developed network of social services in the Church - none of this would exist today, were it not for your highly motivated dedication and the dedication of those who have gone before you. The spiritual vigor of so many Catholic people testifies to the efforts of generations of religious in this land. The history of the Church in this country is in large measure your history at the service of God’s people.* The renewal of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious which is the goal of

this doctrinal Assessment is in support of this essential charism of Religious which has been so obvious in the life and growth of the Catholic Church in the United States.

While recognizing that this doctrinal Assessment concerns a particular conference of major superiors and therefore does not intend to offer judgment on the faith and life of Women Religious in the member Congregations which belong to that conference, nevertheless the Assessment reveals serious doctrinal problems which affect many in Consecrated Life. On the doctrinal level, this crisis is characterized by 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. The current doctrinal Assessment arises out of a sincere concern for the life of faith in some Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. It arises as well from a conviction that the work of any conference of major superiors of women Religious can and should be a fruitful means of addressing the contemporary situation and supporting religious life in its most “radical” sense—that is, in the faith in which it is rooted. According to Canon Law, conferences of major superiors are an expression of the collaboration between the Holy See, Superiors General, and the local Conferences of Bishops in support of consecrated life. The overarching concern of the doctrinal Assessment is, therefore, to assist the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States in implementing an ecclesiology of communion founded on faith in Jesus Christ and the Church as the essential foundation for its important service to religious Communities and to all those in consecrated life.

II. The doctrinal Assessment

The decision of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) to undertake a doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) was communicated to the LCWR Presidency during their meeting with Cardinal William Levada in Rome on April 8, 2008. At that meeting, three major areas of concern were given as motivating the CDF’s decision to initiate the Assessment:

- **Addresses at the LCWR Assemblies.** Addresses given during LCWR annual Assemblies manifest problematic statements and serious theological, even doctrinal errors. The Cardinal offered as an example specific passages of Sr. Laurie Brink’s address about some Religious “moving beyond the Church” or even beyond Jesus. This is a challenge not only to core Catholic beliefs; such a rejection of faith is also a serious source of scandal and is incompatible with religious life. Such unacceptable positions routinely go unchallenged by the LCWR, which should provide resources for member Congregations to foster an ecclesial vision of religious life, thus helping to correct an erroneous vision of the Catholic faith as an important exercise of charity. Some might see in Sr. Brink’s analysis a phenomenological snapshot of religious life today. But Pastors of the Church should also see in it a cry for help.
- **Policies of Corporate Dissent.** The Cardinal spoke of this issue in reference to letters the CDF received from “Leadership Teams” of various Congregations, among them LCWR Officers, protesting the Holy See’s actions regarding the question of women’s ordination and of a correct pastoral approach to ministry to homosexual persons, e.g. letters about New Ways Ministry’s conferences. The terms of the letters suggest that these sisters collectively take a position not in agreement with the Church’s teaching on human sexuality. It is a serious matter when these Leadership Teams are not

providing effective leadership and example to their communities, but place themselves outside the Church's teaching.

- **Radical Feminism.** The Cardinal noted a prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith in some of the programs and presentations sponsored by the LCWR, including theological interpretations that risk distorting faith in Jesus and his loving Father who sent his Son for the salvation of the world. Moreover, some commentaries on "patriarchy" distort the way in which Jesus has structured sacramental life in the Church; others even undermine the revealed doctrines of the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the inspiration of Sacred Scripture.

Subsequently, in a letter dated February 18, 2009, the CDF confirmed its decision to undertake a doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR and named Most Rev. Leonard Blair, Bishop of Toledo, as the CDF's Delegate for the Assessment. This decision was further discussed with the LCWR Presidency during their visit to the CDF on April 22, 2009. During that meeting, Cardinal Levada confirmed that the doctrinal Assessment comes as a result of several years of examination of the doctrinal content of statements from the LCWR and of their annual conferences. The Assessment's primary concern is the doctrine of the faith that has been revealed by God in Jesus Christ, presented in written form in the divinely inspired Scriptures, and handed on in the Apostolic Tradition under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium. It is this Apostolic teaching, so richly and fully taught by the Second Vatican Council, that should underlie the work of a conference of major superiors of Religious which, by its nature, has a canonical relationship to the Holy See and many of whose members are of Pontifical right.

Most Rev. Leonard Blair communicated a set of doctrinal *Observations* to the LCWR in a letter dated May 11, 2009, and subsequently met with the Presidency on May 27, 2009. The LCWR Presidency responded to the *Observations* in a letter dated October 20, 2009. Based on this response, and on subsequent correspondence between the Presidency of the LCWR and the Delegate, Bishop Blair submitted his findings to the CDF on December 22, 2009.

On June 25, 2010, Bishop Blair presented further documentation on the content of the LCWR's *Mentoring Leadership Manual* and also on the organizations associated with the LCWR, namely *Network* and *The Resource Center for Religious Institutes*. The documentation reveals that, while there has been a great deal of work on the part of LCWR promoting issues of social justice in harmony with the Church's social doctrine, it is silent on the right to life from conception to natural death, a question that is part of the lively public debate about abortion and euthanasia in the United States. Further, issues of crucial importance to the life of Church and society, such as the Church's Biblical view of family life and human sexuality, are not part of the LCWR agenda in a way that promotes Church teaching. Moreover, occasional public statements by the LCWR that disagree with or challenge positions taken by the Bishops, who are the Church's authentic teachers of faith and morals, are not compatible with its purpose.

All of the documentation from the doctrinal Assessment including the LCWR responses was presented to the Ordinary Session of the Cardinal and Bishop Members of the CDF on January 12, 2011. The decision of that Ordinary Session was:

- 1) The current doctrinal and pastoral situation of the LCWR is grave and a matter of serious concern, also given the influence the LCWR exercises on religious Congregations in other parts of the world;

- 2) After the currently-ongoing Visitation of religious communities of women in the United States is brought to a conclusion, the Holy See should intervene with the prudent steps necessary to effect a reform of the LCWR;
- 3) The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith will examine the various forms of canonical intervention available for the resolution of the problematic aspects present in the LCWR.

The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in an Audience granted to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal William Joseph Levada, on January 14, 2011, approved the decisions of the Ordinary Session of the Congregation, and ordered their implementation. This action by the Holy Father should be understood in virtue of the mandate given by the Lord to Simon Peter as the rock on which He founded his Church (cf. Luke 22:32): “I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned to me, you must strengthen the faith of your brothers and sisters.” This Scripture passage has long been applied to the role of the Successors of Peter as Head of the Apostolic College of Bishops; it also applies to the role of the Pope as Chief Shepherd and Pastor of the Universal Church. Not least among the flock to whom the Pope’s pastoral concern is directed are women Religious of apostolic life, who through the past several centuries have been so instrumental in building up the faith and life of the Holy Church of God, and witnessing to God’s love for humanity in so many charitable and apostolic works.

Since the Final Report of the Apostolic Visitation of women Religious in the United States has now been submitted to the Holy See (in December, 2011), the CDF turns to the implementation of the above-mentioned decisions approved by the Holy Father as an extension of his pastoral outreach to the Church in the United States. For the purpose of this implementation, and in consultation with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) and the Congregation for Bishops, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has decided to execute the mandate to assist in the necessary reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious through the appointment of a Archbishop Delegate, who will – with the assistance of a group of advisors (bishops, priests, and women Religious) – proceed to work with the leadership of the LCWR to achieve the goals necessary to address the problems outlined in this statement. The mandate given to the Delegate provides the structure and flexibility for the delicate work of such implementation.

The moment for such a common effort seems all the more opportune in view of an implementation of the recommendations of the recent Apostolic Visitation of women Religious in the United States, and in view of this year’s 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, whose theological vision and practical recommendations for Consecrated Life can serve as a providential template for review and renewal of religious life in the United States, and of the mandate of Church law for the work of this conference of major superiors to which the large majority of congregations of women Religious in the United States belong.

III. Implementation: Conclusions of Doctrinal Assessment and Mandate

1) Principal Findings of the Doctrinal Assessment

LCWR General Assemblies, Addresses, and Occasional Papers

One of the principal means by which the LCWR promotes its particular vision of religious life is through the annual Assemblies it sponsors. During the Assessment process, Bishop Blair, in his letter of May 11, 2009, presented the LCWR Presidency with a study and doctrinal evaluation of keynote addresses, presidential addresses, and Leadership Award addresses over a 10 year period. This study found that the talks, while not scholarly theological discourses *per se*, do have significant doctrinal and moral content and implications which often contradict or ignore magisterial teaching.

In its response, the Presidency of the LCWR maintained that it does not knowingly invite speakers who take a stand against a teaching of the Church “when it has been declared as authoritative teaching.” Further, the Presidency maintains that the assertions made by speakers are their own and do not imply intent on the part of the LCWR. Given the facts examined, however, this response is inadequate. The Second Vatican Council clearly indicates that an authentic teaching of the Church calls for the religious submission of intellect and will, and is not limited to defined dogmas or *ex cathedra* statements (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 25). For example, the LCWR publicly expressed in 1977 its refusal to assent to the teaching of *Inter insigniores* on the reservation of priestly ordination to men. This public refusal has never been corrected. Beyond this, the CDF understands that speakers at conferences or general assemblies do not submit their texts for prior review by the LCWR Presidency. But, as the Assessment demonstrated, the sum of those talks over the years is a matter of serious concern.

Several of the addresses at LCWR conferences present a vision or description of religious life that does not conform to the faith and practice of the Church. Since the LCWR leadership has offered no clarification about such statements, some might infer that such positions are endorsed by them. As an entity approved by the Holy See for the coordination and support of religious Communities in the United States, LCWR also has a positive responsibility for the promotion of the faith and for providing its member Communities and the wider Catholic public with clear and persuasive positions in support of the Church’s vision of religious life.

Some speakers claim that dissent from the doctrine of the Church is justified as an exercise of the prophetic office. But this is based upon a mistaken understanding of the dynamic of prophecy in the Church: it justifies dissent by positing the possibility of divergence between the Church’s magisterium and a “legitimate” theological intuition of some of the faithful. “Prophecy,” as a methodological principle, is here directed *at* the Magisterium and the Church’s pastors, whereas true prophecy is a grace which accompanies the exercise of the responsibilities of the Christian life and ministries within the Church, regulated and verified by the Church’s faith and teaching office. Some of the addresses at LCWR-sponsored events perpetuate a distorted ecclesiological vision, and have scant regard for the role of the Magisterium as the guarantor of the authentic interpretation of the Church’s faith.

The analysis of the General Assemblies, Presidential Addresses, and *Occasional Papers* reveals, therefore, a two-fold problem. The first consists in positive error (i.e. doctrinally problematic statements or formal refutation of Church teaching found in talks given at LCWR-sponsored conferences or General Assemblies). The second level of the problem concerns the silence and inaction of the LCWR in the face of such error, given its responsibility to support a vision of religious life in harmony with that of the Church and to promote a solid doctrinal basis for religious life. With this Assessment, the CDF intends to assist the LCWR in placing its activity into a wider context of religious life in the universal Church in order to foster a vision of consecrated life consistent with the Church's teaching. In this wider context, the CDF notes the absence of initiatives by the LCWR aimed at promoting the reception of the Church's teaching, especially on difficult issues such as Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* and Church teaching about homosexuality.

The Role of the LCWR in the Doctrinal Formation of Religious Superiors and Formators

The program for new Superiors and Formators of member Communities and other resources provided to these Communities is an area in which the LCWR exercises an influence. The doctrinal Assessment found that many of the materials prepared by the LCWR for these purposes (*Occasional Papers*, *Systems Thinking Handbook*) do not have a sufficient doctrinal foundation. These materials recommend strategies for dialogue, for example when sisters disagree about basic matters of Catholic faith or moral practice, but it is not clear whether this dialogue is directed towards reception of Church teaching. As a case in point, the *Systems Thinking Handbook* presents a situation in which sisters differ over whether the Eucharist should be at the center of a special community celebration since the celebration of Mass requires an ordained priest, something which some sisters find "objectionable." According to the *Systems Thinking Handbook* this difficulty is rooted in differences at the level of belief, but also in different cognitive models (the "Western mind" as opposed to an "Organic mental model"). These models, rather than the teaching of the Church, are offered as tools for the resolution of the controversy of whether or not to celebrate Mass. Thus the *Systems Thinking Handbook* presents a neutral model of Congregational leadership that does not give due attention to the responsibility which Superiors are called to exercise, namely, leading sisters into a greater appreciation or integration of the truth of the Catholic faith.

The Final Report of the Apostolic Visitation of Religious Communities of Women in the United States (July, 2011) found that the formation programs among several communities that belong to the LCWR did not have significant doctrinal content but rather were oriented toward professional formation regarding particular issues of ministerial concern to the Institute. Other programs reportedly stressed their own charism and history, and/or the Church's social teaching or social justice in general, with little attention to basic Catholic doctrine, such as that contained in the authoritative text of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. While these formation programs were not directly the object of this doctrinal Assessment, it may nevertheless be concluded that confusion about the Church's authentic doctrine of the faith is reinforced, rather than corrected, by the lack of doctrinal content in the resources provided by the LCWR for Superiors and Formators. The doctrinal confusion which has undermined solid catechesis over the years demonstrates the need for sound doctrinal formation—both initial and ongoing—for women Religious and novices just as it does for priests and seminarians, and for laity in ministry and apostolic life. In this way, we can hope that the secularized contemporary culture, with its negative impact on the very identity of Religious as Christians and members of the Church, on their religious practice and common life, and on their authentic Christian spirituality, moral life, and liturgical practice, can be more readily overcome.

2) The Mandate for Implementation of the Doctrinal Assessment

In the universal law of the Church (Code of Canon Law [C.I.C.] for the Latin Church), Canons 708 and 709 address the establishment and work of conferences of major superiors:

Can. 708: Major superiors can be associated usefully in conferences or councils so that by common efforts they work to achieve more fully the purpose of the individual institutes, always without prejudice to their autonomy, character, and proper spirit, or to transact common affairs, or to establish appropriate coordination and cooperation with the conferences of bishops and also with individual bishops.

Can. 709: Conferences of major superiors are to have their own statutes approved by the Holy See, by which alone they can be erected even as a juridic person and under whose supreme direction they remain.

In the light of these canons, and in view of the findings of the doctrinal Assessment, 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 as they “work to achieve more fully the purpose of the individual institutes.”

Therefore in order to implement a process of review and conformity to the teachings and discipline of the Church, the Holy See, through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, will appoint an Archbishop Delegate, assisted by two Bishops, for review, guidance and approval, where necessary, of the work of the LCWR. The Delegate will report to the CDF, which will inform and consult with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and the Congregation for Bishops.

The mandate of the Delegate is to include the following:

- 1) To revise LCWR Statutes to ensure greater clarity about the scope of the mission and responsibilities of this conference of major superiors. The revised Statutes will be submitted to the Holy See for approval by the CICLSAL.
- 2) To review LCWR plans and programs, including General Assemblies and publications, to ensure that the scope of the LCWR’s mission is fulfilled in accord with Church teachings and discipline. In particular:
 - *Systems Thinking Handbook* will be withdrawn from circulation pending revision
 - LCWR programs for (future) Superiors and Formators will be reformed
 - Speakers/presenters at major programs will be subject to approval by Delegate
- 3) To create new LCWR programs for member Congregations for the development of initial and ongoing formation material that provides a deepened understanding of the Church’s doctrine of the faith.
- 4) To review and offer guidance in the application of liturgical norms and texts. For example:

-The Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours will have a place of priority in LCWR events and programs.

5) To review LCWR links with affiliated organizations, e.g. Network and Resource Center for Religious Life.

The mandate of the Delegate will be for a period of up to five years, as deemed necessary. In order to ensure the necessary liaison with the USCCB (in view of Can. 708), the Conference of Bishops will be asked to establish a formal link (e.g. a committee structure) with the Delegate and Assistant Delegate Bishops. In order to facilitate the achievement of these goals, the Delegate is authorized to form an Advisory Team (clergy, women Religious, and experts) to assist in the work of implementation.

It will be the task of the Archbishop Delegate to work collaboratively with the officers of the LCWR to achieve the goals outlined in this document, and to report on the progress of this work to the Holy See. Such reports will be reviewed with the Delegate at regular interdicasterial meetings of the CDF and the CICLSAL. In this way, the Holy See hopes to offer an important contribution to the future of religious life in the Church in the United States.