

Legacy of Vatican II at heart of dispute between Vatican, U.S. nuns

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c. 2012 Religion & Ethics AMITYVILLE, N.Y. (RNS) Fifty years after Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council to modernize the Roman Catholic Church, the legacy of that watershed summit that revolutionized Catholic life is at the core of a dispute between the Vatican and American nuns.

In April, the Vatican accused the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the umbrella group that represents the majority of American nuns, of "doctrinal confusion." As LCWR leaders meet this week (Aug. 7-11) to plot their response to the Vatican, many of the sisters say they are just following the spirit of Vatican II.

"This is not just about the Vatican versus the nuns. This really is about the future of how we interpret the message of the Second Vatican Council," Sister Maureen Fiedler told the PBS program "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly."

Fiedler, a member of the Colorado-based Sisters of Loretto, hosts the weekly radio program "Interfaith Voices" from Washington. She entered religious life 50 years ago, just before Vatican II got underway, and said the spirit of the three-year Vatican summit had a profound impact on how she viewed her calling.

Fiedler became involved in a series of social justice causes, including a 37-day fast in support of the Equal Rights Amendment, and rallies in support of women's ordination.

"It simply made sense to try to alleviate the suffering of the poor, to end wars, to overcome discrimination," she said. "That, for me, was Christianity."

But some critics say many Catholic sisters have been using the Second Vatican Council to justify positions and activities that are in conflict with official church teachings.

"This idea that having this Second Vatican Council and pronouncing that there's this amorphous spirit that gives us license to pretty much throw the baby out with the bath water so to speak when it comes to Catholic doctrine, it's simply wrong, and I think we've heard over and over from Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI that it's wrong," said columnist and author Colleen Carroll Campbell.

From 1962 to 1965, church leaders at the Second Vatican Council produced 16 documents on a host of topics, from introducing local languages into the Mass, to expanding lay involvement and promoting more interfaith dialogue. One of the documents focused on religious life, encouraging Catholic sisters to re-examine their mission, their rules, even their style of dress.

"It called us to go back and look at our foundresses and the spirit in which they started the communities. And when you look at those women who were foundresses, none of them are pussycats, I'm here to tell you," Fiedler said. "They were strong women who did things and started ministries that were in many ways unheard of in their own day."

Many U.S. sisters, including Fiedler, began modifying or even eliminating the traditional habit. But in an even more dramatic change, Vatican II urged nuns to get out of the convent and into the community.

"I think that's one of the great gifts of Vatican II, that it sent us back to study what the Gospels were saying. And over and over again, it was about feed the hungry, visit those in prison, help the poor, it's to go in a sense to the margins," said Sister Mary Hughes, prioress of the Dominican Sisters in Amityville.

The Amityville sisters have a variety of ministries such as literacy classes to teach new immigrant women English, homes to help at-risk women and children, and an organic garden, where about 20 percent of the produce is donated to an interfaith food network.

Hughes is immediate past president of the LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of the country's 57,000 Catholic sisters. The group has increasingly taken advocacy positions, including some that anger the church's male hierarchy.

"These are the sisters that publicly stated to John Paul II that women should be ordained, that women should be allowed to work in all the ministries of the church. This is the same organization that signed the New York Times letter which said that

there is a legitimate diverse opinion on the question of abortion," said University of Utah professor Colleen McDannell, author of "The Spirit of Vatican II."

Hughes and other sisters say there's a difference between raising questions and challenging authority.

"Are there persons who have divergent opinions? I think that's true in the whole church, it's not just true in religious life," said Hughes. "I think sometimes there's a concern if we raise a question that means that we are in defiance, and that's not at all what happens."

In 2008, Vatican officials began an investigation into the lives and doctrine of U.S. sisters. This past April, the Vatican released a report accusing the LCWR of having "serious doctrinal problems." The assessment specifically criticized the group for being "largely silent" on right-to-life issues. And it mandated that the group come under the authority of three U.S. bishops.

"The reality is that we're stuck with a situation and a mandate that we are not happy about," said Hughes. "We answered all the questions that were given to us in the doctrinal assessment honestly, carefully, prudently, and when we didn't hear back, I guess we thought that we were believed."

Hughes said there's more to promoting the sanctity of human life than just working against abortion. She said her community's ministries against domestic violence and in support of homeless mothers and children is also pro-life work.

"That's about the sanctity of human life. It's about doing it differently. I think it's complementary. I don't think you can have one without the other," she said.

Others say that's not enough.

"We're talking about defending the sanctity of every human life, from the cradle to the grave, defending the sanctity of marriage as the church sees marriage as the union of one man and one woman, and just generally promoting church teaching, and upholding that teaching and witnessing with joy to that, and that's not what many lay Catholics have seen," said Campbell.

Some wonder, 50 years after Vatican II, if there is any room for dialogue and debate.

"I see certain people in Rome, in the Vatican, who want retrenchment, who want to go back to the church the way it was before the Second Vatican Council, when the church was essentially the hierarchy, and they determined everything down to sometimes the minutia of Catholic life," said Fiedler.

Campbell, meanwhile, said the answer is fairly clear.

"Women religious need to stand with the church, and if they don't feel that they can in good conscience do that anymore then I think it would take more integrity to simply step back and say, you know, maybe we're not called to be Catholic women religious anymore. Maybe we want to be something else."