

Vatican's doctrinal chief renews criticism of U.S. nuns

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September 3, 2014

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(RNS) The Vatican's guardian of orthodoxy and the force behind Rome's investigation of American nuns has renewed his criticism of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, downplaying the group's size and importance and arguing that the Vatican is trying to help them recover their religious identity so they don't die out.

"Above all we have to clarify that we are not misogynists, we don't want to gobble up a woman a day!" Cardinal Gerhard Mueller told *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's semiofficial newspaper, in the edition published on Monday (September 1).

Mueller, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, told the newspaper that the sisters of the LCWR "do not represent all U.S. nuns, but just a group of North American nuns who form part of an association."

He added: "We have received many letters of distress from other nuns belonging to the same congregations who are suffering a great deal because of the direction in which they"—members of the LCWR—"are steering their mission."

The LCWR is a leadership network of Catholic sisters that represents about 80 percent of the 50,000 nuns in the U.S. The group was established in 1956 with Rome's backing. But in recent years, as the American bishops became more conservative, they grew increasingly critical of the liberal tilt of the various congregations of sisters under the LCWR umbrella.

Behind-the-scenes efforts to rein in the sisters went public in April 2012 when the Vatican revealed that it had been investigating the LCWR and charged that the American sisters were straying too far from traditional doctrines in the theological speculations of some members.

The Vatican's doctrinal watchdog also said the sisters were focusing too much on social justice issues, such as caring for the poor and advocating for immigrants, and were too active in promoting health care reform. It said the LCWR members should spend more time advancing church teachings on sexuality and abortion.

The Vatican announced that it intended to overhaul the LCWR and Pope Benedict XVI appointed a trio of U.S. churchmen, led by Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, to oversee the process and have final approval on the LCWR's major decisions.

The nuns, who were surprised by the report, rejected the Vatican's charges. They said that taking care of society's poor and vulnerable people is central to their historic mission, and the theological ideas of some in their ranks were efforts to articulate that mission in today's church and today's world.

Benedict named Mueller to head the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith a few months later, and he remained in that job even after Benedict resigned and was replaced in March 2013 by Pope Francis. Francis, a member of the Jesuit religious order, is seen as far more open to disagreements in the church and to promoting Catholicism's social justice teachings, and was expected to downplay the LCWR investigation or end it.

But Mueller continued to press ahead with the LCWR takeover, and in a speech in May to LCWR leaders Mueller blasted the group, saying the nuns were thumbing their noses at the Vatican's directives and risked losing their status as a Rome-approved group.

He singled out the group's decision to honor Fordham University theologian Sister Elizabeth Johnson at its annual meeting in August. Johnson is one of the most respected theologians in the U.S., but one of her books was criticized by the doctrinal committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The choice to honor Johnson without Sartain's approval, Mueller said last spring, "will be seen as a rather open provocation against the Holy See. . . . Not only that, but it further alienates the LCWR from the bishops as well."

When Johnson received the LCWR award last month in Nashville, she in turn ripped the Vatican's takeover, saying "the waste of time on this investigation is unconscionable."

This week it was Mueller's turn once again.

While the German cardinal said the CDF has "tried to reduce hostility and tensions," he added that the Vatican wants to help the LCWR congregations "rediscover their identity" because he said the orders "have no more vocations and risk dying out."

Conservative critics of the LCWR point to steep declines in the ranks of their member congregations and say their progressive approach in recent decades is to blame. The LCWR communities are aging rapidly and drawing few new members, and critics say that is not the case in communities belonging to a rival, conservative umbrella group, the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, that was established by Rome in 1992 as a counterpoint to the LCWR.

But research shows that in fact the LCWR and the CMSWR, which represents about 20 percent of women's religious orders in the U.S., are drawing about the same number of new postulants and both face similar challenges of a declining and aging membership.