

# Nuns rap Vatican for ‘unsubstantiated’ charges

by [David Gibson](#) in the [June 27, 2012](#) issue

Leaders representing most of the nation’s 57,000 Catholic nuns answered a Vatican crackdown on their group by charging that Rome’s criticisms of the sisters were “unsubstantiated,” caused “scandal and pain” and “greater polarization” in the church.

“Moreover, the sanctions imposed were disproportionate to the concerns raised and could compromise their ability to fulfill their mission,” the 22-member board of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious warned June 1 in a statement issued after a special four-day meeting in Washington.

The LCWR board meeting followed the surprise announcement in April that Pope Benedict XVI wanted a Vatican-led makeover of the group on the grounds that it was not speaking out strongly enough against gay marriage, abortion and women’s ordination.

Rome also chided the LCWR for doctrinal ambiguity and sponsoring conferences that featured “a prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith.”

The unexpectedly strong pushback to the Vatican may be an indication of how much backlash the campaign has sparked among Catholics, who value the sisters’ long-standing ministry in education, health care and social services and who bristle at Rome’s demands to focus instead on sexual morality and enforcing orthodoxy.

The nuns have received an outpouring of support, from petitions to protests to prayer vigils, and affirmations continued to pour in after the LCWR statement. “We commend the sisters on their prayerful discernment of the Vatican’s mandate,” said Jim FitzGerald of the Nun Justice Project, a lay-led church reform group that was created after the April takeover was announced. “It speaks to the faithfulness of the sisters and the reason why Catholics across the country continue to stand behind them.”

In an interview June 1 with the *National Catholic Reporter*, LCWR president Pat Farrell, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis in Dubuque, Iowa, said that in raising doctrinal and theological issues the nuns in her organization have also been reflecting a wider conversation among Catholics in the church—and one that often finds no other outlet in officialdom.

“The insinuation that I think many people could draw from reading that Vatican document is that if we raise those questions, we’re unfaithful to the church,” Farrell said. “That’s not true. And I don’t think that’s really fair. I think, in fact, that that is a sign of our deepest faithfulness to the church—questions that the people of God need to raise, that we need to talk about together in a climate of genuine dialogue.”

The LCWR response comes as Benedict faces an enormous public relations headache over the leak of sensitive documents that reveal his Roman curia to be a dysfunctional bureaucracy riven by backroom plotting and politicking.

In pointed contrast to the unflattering reports coming out of the Vatican, the LCWR said the standoff must be “addressed by the entire church community in an atmosphere of openness, honesty and integrity.” —RNS