

Nuns reject Rome takeover, seek dialogue with bishops

by [David Gibson](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

American nuns facing a Vatican takeover of their leadership organization have rejected Rome's plans to recast the group in a more conservative mold, but declined—at least for now—to respond with an ultimatum that could have created an unprecedented schism between the sisters and the hierarchy.

Instead, the nuns said they wanted to pursue a negotiated solution to the showdown that has galvanized American Catholics in recent months and prompted an outpouring of support for the sisters which left the Vatican with a black eye.

The statement from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious came in St. Louis at the end of the LCWR's annual assembly August 10. It was the first formal response to the Vatican from the entire organization, which represents most of the 56,000 nuns in the U.S.

The Vatican announced in April that it was assigning a team of bishops to take control of the LCWR in order to make the organization—and by extension, most U.S. nuns—hew more closely and publicly to orthodox teachings on sexuality and theology.

Sister Pat Farrell, the outgoing president of the LCWR, at the assembly's closing read the official response that expressed the organization's "deep disappointment" with Rome's verdict. But the statement also said the nuns wanted to keep talking with the hierarchy in hopes of "creating more possibilities for the laity and, particularly for women, to have a voice in the church."

"Dialogue on doctrine is not going to be our starting point," Farrell told reporters. Farrell added, however, that the sisters will reconsider their options if the LCWR "is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission"—indicating that if the Vatican does not relent on at least some of its plans to revamp the organization, the sisters could make good on the threat to disband the LCWR and reorganize it as an independent body beyond the reach of the Vatican.

The sisters' pointed but measured response seemed to reflect the approach that Farrell outlined in a powerful address to the 900 sisters attending the assembly. Her talk detailed the nuns' public "struggle to balance our life on the periphery with fidelity to the center."

Farrell spoke of how the sisters have historically been committed to serving the poor and marginalized as well as to pushing boundaries within the church. That sometimes led to suppression by the hierarchy, she said, but also to sainthood for many nuns—and to far-reaching changes that have benefited Catholics as a whole.

Farrell's point, and one that seemed to emerge with growing force over several days of contemplation and deliberation, was that the sisters could not continue to expand the church's frontiers on behalf of laypeople and others if they placed themselves beyond the institutional church.

"There is an inherent existential tension between the complementary roles of hierarchy and religious [the nuns] which is not likely to change," Farrell told the sisters. —RNS