

Pope Stands Firm on Reforming 'Radical Feminist' US Nuns

Pope Francis has reaffirmed the Vatican's criticism of a body that represents U.S. nuns, which the Catholic Church said was tainted by "radical" feminism, dashing hopes he might take a softer stand with the sisters.

Francis's predecessor, Benedict, decreed that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), a group that represents more than 80 percent of the 57,000 Catholic nuns in the United States, must change its ways, a ruling which the Vatican said on Monday still applied.

Last year, a Vatican report said the LCWR had "serious doctrinal problems" and promoted "radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith", criticizing it for taking a soft line on issues such as birth control and homosexuality.

The nuns received wide support among American Catholics, particularly on the liberal wing of the Church, as LCWR leaders travelled around the United States in a bus to defend themselves against the accusations.

On Monday the group's leaders met Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Mueller, the new head of the Vatican's doctrinal department, and Archbishop Peter Sartain of Seattle, who has been assigned by the Vatican to correct the group's perceived failings.

"Archbishop Mueller informed the (LCWR) presidency that he had recently discussed the doctrinal assessment with Pope Francis, who reaffirmed the findings of the assessment and the program of reform, " the Vatican's statement said.

The Vatican reminded the group that it would "remain under the direction of the Holy See," the statement said.

It was the nuns' first meeting with Mueller, who succeeded American Cardinal William Levada as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Levada, who retired last year, oversaw the Vatican's investigation of the U.S. nuns.

A statement from the LCWR said the "conversation was open and frank" and added: "We pray that these conversations may bear fruit for the good of the Church".

In April 2012, the doctrinal department criticized the LCWR for challenging bishops and for being "silent on the right to life," saying it had failed to make the "Biblical view of family life and human sexuality" a central plank of its agenda.

The nuns supported President Barack Obama's healthcare reform, part of which makes insurance coverage of birth control mandatory, while U.S. bishops opposed it.

Many nuns said the Vatican's report misunderstood their intentions and undervalued their work for social justice.

Supporters of the nuns said the women had helped the image of the Church in the United States at a time when it was engulfed in scandal over sexual abuse of minors by priests. They were praised by many fellow Catholics and the media for their work with the poor and sick.

Monday's Vatican statement expressed gratitude for the "great contribution" American Catholic nuns had made in teaching and caring for the sick and poor.

Reporting By Philip Pullella

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