

Vatican orders ‘doctrinal assessment’ of group representing US nuns

WASHINGTON - The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has ordered a “doctrinal assessment” of the “activities and initiatives” of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Maryland-based association whose members represent about 95 percent of the 67,000 women religious in the United States.

Sister Annmarie Sanders, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary who is LCWR director of communications, confirmed the investigation in a brief statement released to Catholic News Service April 15.

“At this time, LCWR knows neither the process nor timeline for completion of this assessment,” the statement said. “As more information is made available to LCWR, the conference will take the appropriate steps for its participation in the assessment.”

Bishop Leonard P. Blair of Toledo, Ohio, a member of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Doctrine, is to conduct the assessment at the direction of Cardinal William J. Levada, prefect of the doctrinal congregation. A spokeswoman for Bishop Blair said he was out of town April 15 and not available for comment.

The assessment by Bishop Blair is separate from an apostolic visitation of U.S. institutes of women religious that will look into the quality of life in the communities and why their membership has decreased during the past 40 years.

That study, announced in January and ordered by the Vatican’s Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, is led by Mother Mary Clare Millea, a Connecticut native who is superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, an international religious institute that has its headquarters in Rome.

The LCWR statement said the doctrinal assessment was announced by Cardinal

Levada in a Feb. 20 letter, which the conference received March 10. Officers of the LCWR informed members about the investigation in an April 2 letter.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told CNS April 16 he could confirm the congregation asked Bishop Blair “to undertake in the coming months a study regarding doctrinal problems that have presented themselves in the area of female religious life in the United States.”

Top officials at the doctrinal congregation at the Vatican were out of town and also unavailable for comment.

Although neither the cardinal’s letter nor the LCWR letter has been made public, National Catholic Reporter, an independent national Catholic newspaper based in Kansas City, Mo., said it had obtained a copy of LCWR’s letter to its members.

NCR reported that Cardinal Levada described the assessment as a follow-up to a 2001 meeting between LCWR leaders and officials of the doctrinal congregation, at which the women religious were asked to report on “the initiatives taken or planned” to promote acceptance of Vatican teachings on “the problem of homosexuality,” the ordination of women to the priesthood and the 2000 declaration “*Dominus Iesus*.”

“Given both the tenor and the doctrinal content of various addresses given at the annual assemblies of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the intervening years, this dicastery can only conclude that the problems which had motivated its request in 2001 continue to be present,” Cardinal Levada wrote, according to NCR.

The church teaches that all homosexual acts are morally wrong but affirms the dignity of those with homosexual inclinations and says that having such an inclination is not in itself sinful.

In the 1994 apostolic letter “*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,” Pope John Paul II reaffirmed church teaching that the church “has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women.”

“*Dominus Iesus*,” the doctrinal congregation’s 2000 declaration on the “unicity and

salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the church,” says other Christian churches and communities “suffer from defects” and non-Christians also “are in a gravely deficient situation.”

In its statement, LCWR said the organization “faces this process with confidence, believing that the conference has remained faithful to its mission of service to leaders in congregations of women religious as they seek to further the mission of Christ in today’s world.”

Sister Annmarie said LCWR officials would meet with Cardinal Levada April 22 at the Vatican as part of their regular annual consultation with Vatican offices. The meeting had been scheduled before the doctrinal assessment was announced, she said.

Conference leaders also plan to meet with Bishop Blair “later this spring,” NCR reported.