

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH SISTER MARY HUGHES

SUBJECT: SISTER MARY HUGHES, LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS, WILL TALK ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LCWR'S CURRENT RELATIONS WITH THE VATICAN, AND THE GROUP'S AUGUST 7-11 ASSEMBLY, WHICH IS DEALING WITH A CRITICAL REPORT FROM THE VATICAN.

MODERATOR: THERESA WERNER, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**THERESA WERNER:** (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Theresa Werner, and I am the 105<sup>th</sup> president of the National Press Club. We are the world's leading professional organization for journalists, committed to our profession's future through our programming and events such as these, while fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). And to donate to our programs offered to the public through our National Press Club Journalism Institute, please visit [www.press.org/institute](http://www.press.org/institute).

On behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and those of you attending today's event. Our head table includes guests of our speaker as well as working journalists who are Club members. And, if you do hear applause in our audience, we would like to make note that the general public are attending so it is not necessarily evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity.

I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and our Public Radio audiences. Our luncheons are also featured on our member-produced Podcast from the National Press Club, available on iTunes. You can also follow the action on Twitter using hashtag #NPCLunch. After our guest speech concludes, we'll have a Question and Answer segment, and I will ask as many questions as time permits.

Now it's time for me to introduce our head table guests. And I'd ask each of you here to stand up briefly as your name is announced. From your right Kevin Eckstrom, Editor-in-Chief of the Religious News Service, and a new member of the National Press Club. Carole Sargent, Director of the Office of Scholarship Publications at Georgetown University, Jamaila Bey, radio reporter on the Voice of Russia radio. She's also working on a book that is critical of the role of religion in the lives of African American women. Sister Janet Mock, Executive Director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and guest of our speaker, Alison Fitzgerald, freelance journalist and Chairwoman of the Speakers Committee. I'm going to skip our speaker for just a moment. Alicia Mundy, Wall Street Journal, Member of the Speakers' Committee who organized today's event, Barbara Cochran holds the Curtis Hurley Chair at the Missouri School of Journalism, and formerly head of the radio and television Digital News Association. Katy Steinmetz from Time Magazine, Bobby Caina Calvin, reporter of the Washington Bureau of the Boston Globe. Thank you all for coming.

[applause]

In a year teeming with news about presidential elections, the Olympics, and Syrian uprising, there's been another story that's caught the attention of American, and it doesn't seem to be going away. It involves a dispute between the Vatican, the seat of Pope Benedict, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, and a coalition of American nuns who previously got little media attention, The Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The Leadership Conference, which we're about to learn more about today involves the directors of many orders of sisters representing about 80% of the 56,000 nuns in the U.S. Its members are involved in teaching, nursing, caring for the poor, and spreading the Gospel.

In April, however, the Vatican released a surprisingly critical report that said the nuns are involved in radical feminism and theology at odds with the formal Catholic doctrine. The Vatican said the bishops would be appointed to assume control of the group and to reform it. But the Leadership Conference directors didn't seem to welcome such reform.

The Vatican move provoked outrage amongst many lay Catholics in the U.S., as well as priests and friars who support the sisters. But many conservative Catholics and Church leaders say the Leadership Conference Group should be reined in. The Vatican said the Leadership Conference should focus more on opposing abortion and gay marriage. Many members of the Leadership Conference publicly supported President Obama's healthcare bill. And long before Congressman Paul Ryan was a Vice Presidential contender, the Leadership Conference said this year that they oppose Congressman Ryan's budget because it hurts the poor, a position that the Catholic Bishops' Counsel has also taken.

You may recall that a group of sisters allied with the Leadership Conference began a tour in June called Nuns on the Bus, which went around the country protesting Ryan's budget. The dispute with the Vatican has been portrayed in many ways. As part of the tension between Catholic women and the male hierarchy of the Church, a tug of war between the traditional power center of the Church in Rome and the religious renegades in the new world. Or just another temporary riff with the Church, which will eventually subside.

With us today is the past president of Leadership Conference, Sister Mary Hughes, a prioress in the Dominican Sisters based in New York. She received her Bachelor's degree in elementary education and English, earned a Master of Science from Hunter College, a Masters and Doctorate from Columbia University, and a certificate in public administration from St. John's University.

Sister Mary began her work as a teacher in Brooklyn. By the mid-1990's she was the chairperson of the Education Department at Iona College in New York. But in 1995 her congregation elected her as their prioress. She later returned to Iona, but she was reelected from her congregation in 2007. She has served as the North American representative for the Dominican Sisters International and was also an invited member of the Directorium of the University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome.

In 2009 she began a three year term in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, a term which ended last week at the end of the group's annual assembly in St. Louis. That assembly announced that it wants a dialogue with the bishops over the issues in the Vatican's report, but won't sacrifice its integrity. Sister Hughes is one of the leaders working on that statement.

Once again please give a warm National Press Club welcome to Sister Mary Hughes.

[applause]

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Thank you so much for that warm introduction and welcome. It's really a privilege for me to be here. In all of my time in religious life when I first entered and began teaching, I really never had an aspiration to teach anyone over the age of seven. So I'm really always surprised to find myself in a place such as this. And it's truly an honor to be here.

First I'd like to maybe start off with just a little background on what the Leadership Conference of Women Religious is, and is not. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which is most often referred to as the LCWR, was established in 1956 and then formerly recognized in 1959. And this happened at the request of Pope Pious XII, who asked that the sisters form an organization.

The sisters really didn't want to do it. They had the National Education Association, there was the Catholic Health Association, that was enough for them. But

because the Vatican requested it, they did it. It's a voluntary membership organization whose members are the elected and/or appointed leaders of apostolic women's communities. And when I use the term "apostolic" it's those communities that engage in active work in our world as opposed to contemplative or cloistered orders. And their primary work is prayer. And they do not interact with society in the same way.

It has a threefold purpose. It tries to assist its members personally and communally to carry out more collaboratively their service of leadership in their congregations in order that we might better further the mission of Christ in today's world. It tries to foster dialogue and collaboration among religious congregations within the Church and in the larger society. And it also starts to develop models for initiating and strengthening relationships with groups concerned with the needs of society, so as to maximize the potential of the conference to affect change.

The conference's fundamental stance is one of being in full ecclesial communion with the Church. But it is important to note that what we are not. We are not a theological society. We are not a biblical society. And we are not a formation conference. There are separate entities in the Church that cover all of those things. Nor are the teachings of the Church necessarily the primary focus of our assemblies. Remember, it's a leadership conference. And its primary function is to support the leaders in the complex roles they hold in today's world.

For instance one of the most profound meetings that I experienced was some years ago. The focal point of the conference was a panel of women religious leaders, each of whom had experienced having sisters murdered, some in Africa, some in El Salvador or here. And they talked about how they handled that crisis, how they handled the media and so on. If each of us sat there praying we would never find ourselves in the same role. But it was incredibly moving.

Or even Barbara Marks Hubbard, who was our recent addressee this summer, who talked about the role that she feels women religious could play in bringing a greater wholeness to our world, a world that is just so polarized.

One of the things that evolved in the discussion is you know we hear a lot of talk of, "We really love the sisters. The Church loves the sisters. It's just the LCWR." But you know, the LCWR is sisters. And the sisters who are its members, the leaders, are elected by their own sisters. And we don't hold positions for life. So I was a member of the LCWR from '95 to 2001. Now I'm a member from 2007 to 2013. But then we go back into the ranks and we're sisters again. So it's really hard to separate, in my view, the criticism of the LCWR from sisters in general. Also because our leaders, as leaders, were elected by our communities. And to tell you the truth whether they liked us or didn't like us, they would stand behind us. And they do. So there's been a tremendous amount of support and involvement among the membership of all the women's religious congregations in this country.

A typical assembly, just to give you a taste of it, we might have a speaker or two. There's the business of the organization. So each year we elect the president elect. If there's directional statements that we're approving, they come before the whole body for approval. Because the leaders just stand in the place of, or with a voice of the members. We do not act independently of them.

And then one of the things that we often do is we have resolutions often in areas of social justice. And more often than not, these same resolutions coincide with resolutions that are passed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. So for instance, the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops has a stance against the nuclear proliferation of weapons. We have a similar kind of stance.

We have a resolution calling for immigration reform. The USCCB has a similar resolution. The USCCB has come up against the Ryan budget, feeling that its provisions are duly cruel really to persons who are poor. We would stand in union with the USCCB in this particular relationship.

Although we're situated in the United States, we have sought to keep the lines of communication between ourselves and the Vatican open. And so it has long been a practice of the Leadership Conference to support its presidency and Executive Director so that they might travel to Rome each year to visit a number of the Vatican offices, and communicate about—hear the work that's going on there. And that we in turn can talk about what's happening here.

Such offices would include the Office on Consecrated Life, the Peace and Justice Office, the Office on Inter-Religious Dialogue, the Office on the Pastoral Care of Migrants and so on. We usually stop to see the U.N. Ambassador to the United States. We visit the leaders of other religious congregations who are there. Often, so often, when we were in various Vatican offices, particularly the work on immigration, on migrants, they would be talking about their thrust, and we would be able to augment the conversation by speaking about the work of the sisters here in the United States. And more often than not to be sure that our work coincided with the efforts of the various Vatican offices to go on.

In 2001 the President of the LCWR also requested a meeting with the Office on the Congregation for Doctrines and Faith because they just had not met with them in some time. We don't primarily work with Doctrinal issues as we see it, so they hadn't seen a need. They replied that they would like to meet with the presidency, but they wanted them to be prepared to speak about three issues. One was ordination as being reserved to men. The next was on the primacy of Jesus, and also on homosexuality.

The presidency went prepared to that meeting. It was never brought up, never brought up. Each year since then we go to the CDF, the Congregation for Doctrine and Faith, and we sat there and we said, "Do you have any questions, anything?" I'll tell you it's usually very cordial. So then we were surprised, very surprised, when in March 2009

a letter announcing the doctrinal assessment was mailed to the current President at that time who was Sister J. Lora Dambroski, a Franciscan sister.

So another way in which we've sought to keep our ties with the Vatican is we also made annually with the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States. That had been Archbishop Sambini, who went home to God this past year. And now it's Archbishop [23:06]. And we've always had fruitful, positive discussions. I remember one of my last conversations with Archbishop Sambini, I said, "Do you have any questions? Is there anything coming up?" This is after we already had the letter announcing the doctrinal assessment. And he said to me in his very charming way, and I only wish I could duplicate his Italian accent, he said, "I receive many questions about many things, and many letters, but I have none about you," which is the best news anyone could really want to hear in one of those offices.

So when we had the information on the doctrinal assessment, we responded as candidly, as fully and as completely as we could. And in some areas we found there was erroneous attribution. Sometimes it might have been a comment that someone had answered on the floor, which was not at all the substance of the talk that got reported as the substance of the talk. So we corrected some of that information. Because I will tell you quite honestly, the LCWR does not seek to have on its roster persons who speak against the Church. This is not a case of sisters over and against the Church. We are a part of the Church. The LCWR is recognized by the Vatican. And we are very aware of that relationship, very grateful for it and very respectful of it.

So then in between when we submitted the written format we were back in the CDF office, again the following year. I specifically asked, "Are there any new questions? Is there anything else you need further elaboration on?" "No, no new questions, no nothing." Well we know now that the report was already written. But it was not yet revealed to us until April 18<sup>th</sup>, when we were issued the assessment and the mandate.

And so when the presidency spoke about how stunned they were, they truly were stunned because as you might imagine we thought things were going well. So then we met as an LCWR assembly last week from August 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> in St. Louis, Missouri. More than 900 were gathered in that room. Now a typical assembly might have 650, 700 during the apostolic visitation there were more. I don't remember the last time we've had this many women come together, and really at great sacrifice to the congregations.

Many congregations, as they look at their own resources, might choose to send two of their members to the LCWR assembly. This year they found the money to send all of their leadership, because they were so aware of how important this was. The way the assembly body went about making a decision about how to move forward, I think is as important and as historic as the decision itself. There were no fiery speeches, there was no denigration of the Vatican or anyone else. We spent significant time in contemplative silence, contemplative listening and contemplative prayer.

We had also placed a priority upon being able to listen to minority voices in the room, and honoring that perspective. In the end, on the last day when the press release was crafted and it was read to the assembly body, that was the only time that people got up and stood up and cheered. I often say if you put five of us in a room and ask us to decide a room color we might not achieve consensus. But here we had more than 900 people in a very short space of time, and there was unanimity about our direction.

I was actually wishing that some of the members of Congress might be able to be in the room just to see another way to do things.

You also need to know how very grateful we are for the media attention that has surrounded this. We did not plan for this. Actually it was the congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that put this public. And it made the assessment and the mandate public. The press and the media coverage, I believe, has been thoughtful, probing and insightful. And I think in so many ways the press coverage has encouraged and challenged Catholic sisters to be more articulate about who we are and what we do.

You know we just did our work before, we just didn't think it was important to do any advertising. And this has caused us to step up to the plate. In the past we have often lamented the usage of nun jokes, and the caricatures that are in our eyes were far too prevalent. Well, the level of conversation has been significantly raised, and we're very grateful to you for helping us to do that.

We also hold in our hearts deep gratitude for the thousands of women and men who have written in support of the work of the sisters. There were thousands of letters and emails. We had binders this thick. They poured into the national office, and hundreds that were sent to each of the President separately.

When we gathered for our assembly, more than 1,500 letters were delivered right to the hotel that we were at. And they distributed the letters on our tables, and it was really the centerpiece, so that each table could have some sense of the level of support. And I would have to tell you that the letters of support were not just, you know, "You go, girls, this is wonderful, keep doing this." It was people pouring out their own faith stories. And in so many instances their own struggles. And saying, "Could you help us find a way that there could be a place to speak." We're not talking about changing necessarily Church doctrine. We're talking about just a place to speak or to raise questions.

Their support, evidenced in so very many ways, was proudly encouraging to us. There are certain things that are clear I think in our response. First, it is the deep desire of the membership to stay within the Church and not move away from it. You may have heard speculation, "Well, the sisters will move out of their Church." Or, "The Leadership Conference will become what you call a non-conical, or a non-Church related entity."

Well, first of all, only Rome can confer this. So we could ourselves decide to change the LCWR to a non-canonical entity. We could all withdraw, we could form another thing. That was not clearly, clearly not the desire of the membership. We derive

our strength from the sacramental life of the Church. We love the gospel. We follow the example of Christ. And we believe our Charism are essential and necessary gifts to be offered at the service of the Church. And a Charism is a gift that each founder of a religious congregation brought. So in my congregation, the Dominicans, our love for truth and our love for the preaching is very much what we do.

The Sisters of Mercy have a preeminent focus on the mercy of Christ that they manifest. And so as each congregation brings its gift, it is a gift to the total Church. At the same time because we work with those who are unserved or underserved we also bring challenges to the Church. And that's the piece that's tricky to hold.

Secondly, *Perfectæ Caritatis* which was a document of the Second Vatican Council, challenged religious congregations to renewal and reform. That was in 1965. The teaching of a Vatican council are the highest teachings of the Church. Religious women took these commands seriously and were obedient to the will of the Holy Sea. And we do live authentic religious life. The vows that Mark consecrated life, poverty, celibacy, obedience are very much there.

Third, we need to find the ways to engage in honest, respectful and loving dialogue. Pope Paul VI issued an encyclical titled *Ecclusiæ Suam* in 1964 that outlined principles of effective dialogue. This had seemed to be a moment to reclaim those principles for the sake of the Church, and for all who longed to call this Church their home. It seems manifestly clear that our annual visits to Rome, and the committee participation of LCWR members on the bishops' committees are insufficient. Well, there are dioceses in which there are wonderful and honest communications between the bishop of the dioceses and the religious congregations that are there. That is not present in every place.

So there has to be a way to deepen the communication. You know, as we looked at the assessment—and it went back to something in 1997—we said, “If it was disturbing to them in 1997, why did it take so long to say it?” It might better have been resolved in 1997 when the current leaders of the LCWR might have been able to respond to it in person.

It was also clear from the membership that they do not desire that we allow the mandate and the assessment to consume all of our time going forward. In fact right immediately following the assembly, the presidency and the executive director met with Archbishop Sartain and then he met with the Board of the Leadership Conference afterwards. So dialogue and the listening has already begun. So that we continue to do.

In terms of going forward in addition to that direction, Sister Pat Farrell, the outgoing President in her masterful presidential address offered us six guidelines by which we might navigate these kind of rough waters as we move forward. We are going to continue to do this in a contemplative fashion. If the prayer and the respectful and contemplative listening could bring 900 women to come to a common direction, we have to believe that that deep prayer is going to continue to bring the healing and the direction,



the change of hearts—And that might be-- You know, real dialogue does not involve winners and losers. It's about a way that we both get stretched.

So that that will really happen, we believe strongly that the charisms of our congregation offer a prophetic voice to the Church. Now prophetic voice is not what my will is, or what my intention is. It's honed by deep asceticism, deep listening. But I've always said that we work so much on the margins, you know. And we fall in love with the people we work with. And many of those people feel excluded from the Church. So, when we go back to the center, we raise those questions. That's not defiance, it's wanting the Church to be all that it can be. It's so that we can hopefully find a greater place that those who are on the margins might also feel at home in the Church.

But that prophetic voice will continue through our solidarity with the marginal life. And this comes from Sister Pat Farrell, who has the heart of a missionary. She said, "You know, when you work with people who are very poor, or who live under oppression, they don't have a need to keep up appearances. And so, through their eyes, they often see what needs to be unmasked." And so we will continue to work with persons who are poor, and try to look at our world through their eyes, because they inform us.

It'll be through community, community with ourselves, community with persons like yourself, who long to find a place to solve things differently than the examples of the very polarized world in which we live right now. It is so difficult sometimes to have a discussion on anything. Already, the campaign ads are hyped up too much already. And, you know, so many things-- you're red, you're white, you're-- There's black and white. Where is the avenue where people can sit and work together?

We believe, very strongly, that the Church is the body of Christ, and that all parts of that body have to find a way to be at home in it, to be able to talk with one another, to be able to be stretched by one another. We will do this in a way that is not violent. It will not be by yelling or screaming or defamation. It will be from a very deeply peaceful place. And, in order to do that, that relates back to the contemplation. It's allowing the time to listen, so that the voice we might offer is not necessarily our own voice, but comes from a place where we believe the Spirit of God is speaking, and that we're going to move forward in joyful hope.

There are many who have said to us, "Dialogue. Do you really think that's possible?" Well, as people of the Gospel, we always live in hope. And we believe that if we introduce-- maybe that's our gift to the Church at this moment in time, to bring a different stance, to invite into dialogue those who might differ with us, so that together, we might come to a greater truth.

Thank you very much. And I look forward to the opportunity to respond to your questions.

[applause]

**THERESA WERNER:** If the Vatican decides not to have a dialogue with your group, what is your next move? Do you have a plan B? And do all the nuns in individual member orders get to vote on what you do?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** There's a couple of questions in there. Well first of all, the dialogue has already begun with Archbishop Sartain. And so I think that's very promising. I have met him. He is very cordial. He certainly seems to demonstrate the capacity to listen. And, as I understand it, the board meeting was a very honest exchange. So the dialogue has begun.

In terms of voting, as to what to do, it's the leadership, the leaders of the congregations that have the vote on what will come next. They also placed a vote of confidence in the Presidency that, as they move forward, they should use their best judgment as they go through. And we do have confidence in them that they will.

As far as our members, we do the best we can to keep the members of our congregations informed. I think most of us, at this point, have had separate meetings with our own congregations to say what has been going on, to allow the sisters to have their own voice on this. I know, in my own congregation, I think because I was the one-- one of the people in Rome to receive this, they've been incredibly supportive.

And so, again, it's a matter of living in joy and hope as we move forward.

**THERESA WERNER:** How are the nuns' orders' leaders appointed? Are they appointed by bishops or by the Vatican?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Really, by neither. In my own congregation, they elect the leader. So, and that's done-- There's a whole process by which delegates who have a status in the congregation agree to a whole level of education, move forward. And they are involved in an election and/or a discernment process, where the congregation might sit and say, "What needs do we have going forward? And who might be the best women in our congregation who have the gift to do this?"

There are some congregations who have-- their office, their head organization is in Rome. And so, in a few instances, the congregation itself votes on or nominates people. And then the affirmation would come from their own leadership headquarters, not from the bishops, and not from the Vatican.

**THERESA WERNER:** Have there been other similar tensions between groups of U.S. Catholic nuns and Rome, or U.S. Bishops' groups previously?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** The one that occurs to me was in South America, the Conference of Latin American Religious. It's called CLAR. Some years back, there was a doctrinal assessment of them. They were about to publish a book. It had to be

withdrawn. Their leadership was withdrawn, and the Vatican appointed leadership for that organization.

We have been in conversation with those leaders who were present at that time. And they've given some very helpful direction, most of it similar to what we came out with ourselves: stay very calm; stay very centered; and keep the dialogue open. And that's where the understanding grows.

**THERESA WERNER:** Back to plan B, if a dialogue fails, what does it mean for LCWR becoming independent?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** I think it's too premature to answer something like that. First of all, we're hopeful that the dialogue will continue. And, if it doesn't, then it's the members have to come back. One of the things we've been very concerned about, given our love for the Church, is that we don't do anything that will split the conference and have some go some way, some another way.

I mean you could not belong to any conference. You don't have to. There is another conference of Women Religious in the country, the Conference is CMSWR, Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious. And they follow a more traditional life. I would have to look different to join that conference.

So there would be-- you know, there's different ways. And they're all valid. It's all part of the diversity of gifts that are within the Church. But it would be too premature right now to venture a guess on the eventual outcome.

**THERESA WERNER:** What authority, if any, does the Vatican and/or the bishops have over LCWR?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** It's the Vatican that has the ultimate authority. I would assume-- and I don't know the ins and outs of all of this-- that they look for feedback from the bishops. And, as I said, in many dioceses within the country, there are wonderful relationships with bishops, who have been so supportive of us.

Let me put it this way. There is a member of the conference who said-- She raised a question at one point, "Is this a matter of doctrine or docility?" And she may have hit the nail on the head, you know, which doesn't mean that we shouldn't be a great deal more prudent and respectful as we go forward.

**THERESA WERNER:** What are you willing to compromise? And what are you not willing to compromise on?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** The conference, the body of Women Religious agreed upon certain principles that were important to us. One is that we would stand in our integrity. And I also believe the bishops stand in their integrity. But we have to find those ways. I think there would be resistance if there was any way to reshape this. We

don't see ourselves as a teaching arm of the Church. Nor do we see it as our role to discuss Church documents at our assemblies.

A number of our women are theologians. We have a wonderful university system in this country. And, throughout the country, we know that Women Religious avail themselves of ongoing education, of wonderful lectures at various universities, and so on. So to us, it seems repetitive to try to set up a way to do that at our assembly. Again, we have focused on the leadership skills and how do we prepare our members to live in this complex society. I think the resistance would primarily come if there was an effort to change us, to change the nature of the conference.

**THERESA WERNER:** Your group is one of several including Catholic Bishop Conferences and Network Lobby, the social justice group that ran the Nuns on the Bus, that expressed deep concerns earlier this spring about Paul Ryan's budget, saying that it is a failure from a moral standpoint. Are you going to continue speaking out about this issue, now that Mr. Ryan is a candidate for Vice-President?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** First, just a word of clarity. The LCWR did not sponsor Nuns on a Bus. That was sponsored by Network, a Catholic social justice lobby. And so, while the information was communicated to us, we did not support it monetarily. We may have had members who participated, but that was at their own choice. So it might be just important to separate that.

We have-- it's Network, really, that has spoken so much on Paul Ryan's budget, and I believe made an effort to meet with him as they went into Wisconsin. We don't traditionally, as a conference, speak out against any candidate. We have really tried to keep politics separately, separate. But, as we go forward, I would tell you that it is our consensus that budget practices that are detrimental to the poor would not be something we could support.

**THERESA WERNER:** Has your group asked to talk to Mr. Ryan about your concerns in his budget plans?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** We have not. But I know Sister Simone Campbell has. And I don't know whether or not that occurred.

**THERESA WERNER:** How many members are there in your leadership conference? And how many do they represent?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** There are 1,500 women leaders in this conference. And how many they represent? Oh it's 56,000 in the United States.

**THERESA WERNER:** Has your group encouraged the Church to consider ordaining women as priests?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** No, we have not. We have actually not had a speaker to talk about ordaining women. There was-- Do people have viewpoints on this? Obviously they do. But we're very aware of what our canonical status is. So we have never had an assembly where we invited speakers to speak publicly on the ordination of women.

**THERESA WERNER:** Do you think the Vatican crackdown is the hierarchy payback for many of the sisters supporting the Healthcare Reform?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** There is a lot of speculation as to the reasons why this is released at this point in time. And that is certainly one of them. You know, some have drawn the inference that, because so many sisters supported the Healthcare Reform, that it meant we're against the Church on abortion. And that is not at all the case.

What the difference between the Bishops Conference and the Sisters Conference is that we differ in our interpretation of the reading of the bill. And indeed, several court cases have already upheld that absolutely none of that money has been used for abortion.

**THERESA WERNER:** How are young women expected to answer the call to the sacrament of holy orders when their most recent references illustrate that they will be silenced and at least rebuked for acting in accordance with their conscience?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Again, a clarification. Believe me. When they come to us, they cannot present themselves for holy orders. [laughter] That is reserved-- That is reserved for males who have studied for the priesthood. There is a concern about that. I would tell you that some of the letters that we received-- I happened to read one in particular, who said, "You know, this is why I terminated my discernment to religious life."

On the other hand, if women are looking and interested in joining an intelligent, well-educated, articulate group of women who can speak on behalf of the poor, and will not compromise their consciences, we await you with open arms at our doors.

**THERESA WERNER:** How do you reconcile your vows of obedience in light of what is being demanded by the Vatican?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Obedience, at its very deepest sense, is listening. And it's listening carefully. You know, in the principles of dialogue that Pope Paul VI outlined, he talks about how important it is-- The very first thing is, that each person makes every effort to understand the perspective of the other. Every effort. I think we're not there yet.

But that obedience, when we're sure that that dialogue has taken place, I think we'll both be changed by the capacity of the dialogue. I think some folks have a kind of concept of obedience that, if your superior says it, or your bishop says it, or someone says it, you automatically do it. And that's what often was called blind obedience in the past.

In religious communities, I wouldn't do that with my own sisters. If I want someone to do something, we sit, we talk about it. If she feels she couldn't do it, it could be as simple as, I think she would love her to go on to study for a doctorate. And we'll sit there, and she'll tell me the reasons why she thinks she should or should not. And we take all of that into account. So that's the kind of obedience that we will follow, one that incorporates the listening and then honestly agrees that that's where we should be or where we should go.

**THERESA WERNER:** Why have we not heard from you and your organization of Women Religious about the accusations and indictment of priests for sexual abuse of children?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** The indictment, the accusations of sexual abuse are an awful scandal in our Church. And it's been a very, very painful moment for priests, for bishops, for cardinals, for so many who are healthy in our Church, and who minister without reserve, without question, with great generosity and integrity.

Actually, what I would say is, that we have many of our sisters have written letters to bishops when one of their men was indicted, just offering them prayerful support as we went forward. We would never use the sinfulness of some members to denigrate the reputation of the whole. And so that's been a really conscious choice. We pray for those, and we work with survivors. We work with victims. We try to support them. You know, in many cases, we were the ones who went and reported things that we were very uncomfortable with.

So our loyalty, in all truth, is split in a number of directions. It's split with very good people who really desire to govern the Church well. It is very much for the sake of those who have been abused, and for their ongoing healing. I don't know how one ever heals from those scars, and the ongoing support. But to be available, to try to-- Some would argue that, had there been greater conversations with women much earlier, maybe the abuse scandal would not have gone on for so long. Again, that's speculation. But I think it's helpful to have women's voices in the mix as well as men's.

**THERESA WERNER:** Do you think that the attack on the sisters is an attempt to change the subject from the issue of abuse of children by priests?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Again, it's a speculative issue. There has been a wonderful article written in the *National Catholic Reporter* that talks about this being a distraction. I think, in all truth, you know, there is multiple facets of truth that are there. And it's in our world, which is so complex. And this is so complex. I think it's hard to say it would be any one thing. Could it be a factor for some? It's a possibility.

**THERESA WERNER:** In 1979 the head of LCWR, Sister Kane, asked Pope John Paul II about women in all male ministries. Has that public moment at St. Patrick's Cathedral made the Vatican watch LCWR more closely over the years?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Again, that's a speculative question. She really-- She did not ask for the ordination of women. She said, "When is the Church going to be open to having more women in roles in the Church?" And I don't know. Sometimes, you know, we all have different degrees of comfortability(?) in responding to questions. And so whether I think that was a question that was very forward-thinking at its time, it was a challenge. But I don't know. I really can't say whether it focused attention on the leadership conference, or even Women Religious in general.

**THERESA WERNER:** Do you believe that nuns should devote more of their focus to opposing abortion and gay marriage?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Actually, on the-- If I could speak first on the abortion question, I think it's not a matter of either-- I think that sisters do oppose abortion. But we do it in a different way from the bishops. The bishops have operated very politically. And they're very public in their demonstrations that take place in Washington each year, in their voice from the pulpit, a voice we don't have. And they very much supported that. And they do that really well.

Behind the scenes, there are sisters in so many of our congregations who work in prolife clinics, where they help to counsel women. And, you know, there's usually no salaries in those places. So we're supporting our women as they do that work. I can't tell you how many of our sisters have counseled young women in our high schools or in our colleges against abortions, and have helped them to get the necessary support that they need.

Every time we open a clinic or a place where mothers, homeless mothers and their children can come to get the support that we need, all of that is supporting the right to life. Even our literacy programs help mothers to be better mothers for their children. They'll say to me, "Now I can read to my children. Now I can talk to my child's teacher." All of that is prolife work. And so I don't think it's either/or. I think the Church needs both. And I think it's just a matter of enlarging the conversation a bit.

And actually, many sisters do go to Washington for those clinic-- the demonstrations. As sisters age, it becomes less likely that they're going to have the stamina to be able to endure a ride like that. But it still happens. And it's very much there.

In terms of gay marriage, we haven't really been asked to speak about it. We have not had a discussion on it. And we don't usually speak out on those doctrinal issues. The bishops have made it very clear that they are the teaching arm of the Church. And so actually, I'm a little surprised when they're asking us to speak about some of these things, because you don't want to get in the way of what they're saying. So it's unlikely that we're going to speak on gay marriage.

**THERESA WERNER:** Pope Benedict two years ago changed Catholic doctrine to make it such that the use of condoms need not be, in every case, a violation of Catholic law. Considering that the majority of American female Catholics admit to using birth control at some point, should we believe that a similar evolution policy will be made for contraception?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Again, that's hard to speculate. Just at the beginning of July, the *London Tablet* ran a wonderful article, something called "Sin Is Not Simple." And it went into defining what is involved in making-- of committing a sin. And it said so often people look at the end result, which is what people have-- what a priest might have to hear in confession, and judge it as sinful, when the really important question is, what was the motivation?

The example that the author used was someone might go in and say, "Oh, I missed Mass on Sunday," which objectively might be judged as sinful. But, if the priest said, "Well, why did you miss Mass on Sunday?" "Well, my baby was sick. I couldn't take the baby to Church. There was no one there to stay with the baby." Well, there's no sin because of the motivation.

And so the issue of contraceptives, the issue of freedom of conscience on any issue that might be outlined by the Church would always be guided by the larger moral principles, which are, what are the motivation? In some cases, it might be violent not to use the contraception. So those are very fine things. They require a lot of discussion, a lot of guided consciencing, before one comes to a conclusion. And it is unlikely that any conclusion for one person will necessarily be the conclusion for the second.

**THERESA WERNER:** What did the statement mean, "To keep our integrity in the face of Vatican efforts at reform"?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** I think that's meant in a variety of ways. One is, our integrity as a leadership conference, that we want to continue to offer leaders the kinds of opportunities, the kinds of skills, the kind of exposure that might better enable them to lead in this very complex time in which we lead. And so, if there were an effort, say, to turn us into something that only discusses Church teaching, well that's not as useful to leaders at this moment. There's other ways they can do that.

I read the documents on my own. And I discuss them with people locally. I don't really go to a leadership conference to discuss Church documents. I do go to be stretched. But remember, I come out of a college background. And in colleges, you put out any number of ideas. And you discuss them. You don't necessarily agree with them. You might disagree violently with them. But it stimulates thought. And it refines thinking. And that's the value that I find in the leadership conference.

**THERESA WERNER:** Can Catholicism survive this rift between its patriarchy and the female membership, which is, by virtue of their gender alone, will never ascend the power structure to enact change?



**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** I would certainly hope so. And I would believe that it could. You know, back in 1986, Joseph Cardinal Bernadine wrote *A Reflection On Religious Life*. And he talked about, even then, he had such an insight for finding where the gaps were in our common ground efforts. And he talked about the tensions between the ecclesial realities and then the charisms of religious life.

And he said, then, how important it is to find ways for those structures, the ecclesial and the charismatic, to talk with one another, so that the Church is enriched by the tension and not torn apart by the tension. And that's exactly what our hope would be.

**THERESA WERNER:** The Bishops Conference has said that Paul Ryan's budget fails the moral test. Does LCWR agree?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** The LCWR, as a unit, has not discussed this. I would say many of its members might feel the same way. But, as a conference, we have not come out with a stand, nor had a discussion on Paul Ryan's budget.

**THERESA WERNER:** When you talk about dialogue with the Vatican, who will be speaking on LCWR's behalf?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** The persons who are authorized to speak on behalf of the LCWR are its Presidency and executive director, together. Each year, when we go to Rome, it's the Presidency and executive director together. It's four persons. But we are a membership organization. So they will speak on behalf. But, in terms of accepting a condition, or agreeing to a condition, they come back to the membership. They come back to the board, and they come back to its membership.

I realize that that structure can appear a bit cumbersome for those who might look for easier answers. But it's really a safeguard. And it's a model of the collaborative way in which Women Religious work together.

**THERESA WERNER:** Do you have any message for those who have left the faith because of their displeasure of Church leadership over the abuse scandals and the positions on social justice issues, such as AIDS in Africa and overpopulation?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** I think my advice would be personal. As a person who was in the office, the CDF office on April 18<sup>th</sup> to receive this mandate, I found it personally-- I felt humiliated by the experience of being there and hearing what the Vatican had to say, when I know how hard Women Religious have worked at dialogue, at communicating about their lives, and so on.

And I know, when I came home, as I sat with my own bishop and cried, and I said to him, "Sometimes we have to pray to give our hearts back to the Church." And, you know, for people who have been hurt in profoundly scarring ways by our Church, I guess it's just the prayer I would ask them to offer themselves, that if they can, and it's slow,

but to pray that they can find the grace to give their hearts back to the Church. Because, as Yves Congar said early on, around the time of the Vatican Council, the Church is holy, in spite of those who inhabit it. [laughter] So we look for the ways to give our hearts to the holy.

**THERESA WERNER:** What is the status of Catholic religious women today? Are your numbers growing or shrinking, aging? How would you characterize the future?

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Well, if I could use my own community as an example, we began with four, who came over from Germany to work with German immigrants in Philadelphia, and were never met at the dock. So we wound up in New York. [laughter] So so many religious congregations have comparable kinds of heroic beginnings.

Then, the anomaly was, really, that we grew so very large. And some of that anomaly, I think was probably due to the fact-- I remember a woman who entered with me, and I entered in 1968. And she said, "You know, when I looked at the nuns I had in school," she said, "They were great teachers. They were going to school. They were doing all these exciting things. My mother"-- 1968, remember-- "was home washing the floors." She said, "For me, it was a women's issue that I entered the community."

And so, as we begin to discern more about what really constituted a calling to religious life, some women who came for other reasons discerned that maybe this wasn't where they were called to spend their life. And they left. And they remain friends of our congregation. And they do wonderful work in places that we can't get into.

So we are smaller. But we have always had a steady one, two, three people always talking to us about coming in. They tend to be more educated. Our recent vocations come from our Latina women. We had a final vows on the Feast of St. Catherine of Sienna at the end of April. And Flora was originally an immigrant from El Salvador. She is a U.S. citizen now. And the whole community just loves her, because of her sense of mission.

The next final vows will be next spring. And it's going to be in our Province of Puerto Rico. So I think it's a new immigrant population that's entering the Church. Religious life is a gift to the Church. And I don't think God is going to take the gift away.

**THERESA WERNER:** We're almost out of time. But, before asking the last question, I have a couple of housekeeping matters. First I'd like to remind you about our upcoming luncheon speakers. On August the 28<sup>th</sup>, we have General James Amos, the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, will discuss the roles of the Marines as America's crisis response force. On September 6<sup>th</sup>, Kathleen Turner, actress and chair of Planned Parenthood's Board of Advocates will discuss reproductive rights. And on September 13<sup>th</sup>, James P. Hoffa, President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters will discuss defining patriotism, protecting America and the American workers.

Second, I'd like to present our guest with our famous National Press Club mug.  
[laughter]

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** Thank you. I'll treasure this.

**THERESA WERNER:** And the last question is, how do you think the perception of nuns has changed in the U.S., not always pictured as holding rulers and looking stern? [laughter]

**SISTER MARY HUGHES:** We probably should write a thank you note to the Vatican for shedding a different light on Women Religious. And, you know, with every challenge, there is always a blessing on the other side. And there have been so many blessings already associated with this particular crisis, as some might see it, in our own lives.

One of them certainly has been to draw greater attention to the work of Women Religious, where we've come from since those stereotypic days, how well educated women are, how far we've gone to the margins, to work with the unserved or the underserved. And we're very grateful for that.

I think, as I said in my opening remarks, we're grateful to the media for that. We're grateful for the thousands and thousands of laypeople, men in consecrated life, men and women, who have written to us, to support us. We are not perfect. But we are challenged all the time by your example. We are challenged to think more as you confide in us the complexity of your own lives.

So there are-- there are blessings. And I don't know if I've answered the question. I lost track of the question. All right. [laughter] But I do want to thank you for this opportunity to be with you today. Thank you very much.

[applause]

**THERESA WERNER:** Thank you all for coming today. I'd like to thank our National Press Club staff and our Journalism Institute and Broadcast Center for organizing today's event. Finally, a reminder that you can find out more information about the Press Club at our website and get a copy of today's program. Please check out our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). Thank you. And we're adjourned.

[GAVEL]

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