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Sister Pat Farrell, left, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and Sister Janet Mock, the executive director, smile following a meeting with Cardinal William Levada at the Vatican, June 12. The Vatican told the leaders of American nuns, who were accused of being too feminist and politicised, that their group "remains under the supreme direction of the Holy See."

Religious fervor

What's at stake in the Vatican's crackdown of the nation's leadership for women religious

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In early August, a gathering of about 900 nuns in St. Louis passed resolutions calling for Congress to pass the Dream Act and to enact comprehensive immigration reform to reunite families and create a path to citizenship. They passed a resolution calling for the repeal of restrictive state laws that create fear among immigrant communities, and passed another that would commit lawmakers to end human trafficking.

They heard presentations on consciousness evolution in the face of global crises, and how religious life might evolve as it moves into the future. There were tools presented for navigating this brave new world, emphasizing nonviolence and solidarity with the marginalized.

Indeed, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious packed a lot into its three-day conference between Aug. 7-10, except what the Vatican wants them to spend more time on: speaking out against abortion, contraception and homosexuality.

Those issues were central to the Vatican's three-year investigation of the organization, whose 1,500 members represent 57,000 women religious, or 80 percent of the entire population of nuns in the United States.

Released in April, the results of the doctrinal assessment were damning: Led by former Portland Archbishop, now Cardinal, William Levada, the assessment by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith accused the group of serious doctrinal problems. The CDF said that by not actively advocating against abortion, birth control, same-sex marriage and the ordination of women, the women religious were in fact giving their approval of these hot button issues, and instead channeling their energies into social justice efforts. This "radical feminism" according

to the assessment, was in conflict with the teaching of the church, and that the organization had to be reformed.

As a result, the organization has been ordered under the control of Seattle's Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, who, along with two other bishops, will oversee the group's reform for the next five years.

Conservative critics have called the LCWR a "rogue" organization, committed to "liberal social causes." One cardinal has said that if it can't be reformed, it doesn't have a right to exist. Cardinal Levada has been quoted as saying the organization — now certified by the Vatican — could be decertified if it doesn't conform. The LCWR says the assessment, "was based on unsubstantiated accusations and the result of a flawed process that lacked transparency," and that the sanctions could compromise the groups ability to fulfill its mission.

At the end of their conference on Aug. 10, the nuns released their formal statement on the matter, affirming their voice in the future of the church: The organization will proceed with the discussions with the bishops as long as possible, "but will reconsider if LCWR is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission." In fact, the membership's directive to LCWR officers was that work with the CDF not distract from the work of the organization. It was a tepid commitment to work together, but only so far.

At stake is the future role of women not only within the Catholic Church, but also the role of Catholic women in doing social work already steeped in politics from Vatican City to Washington, D.C. The work of women religious is square in the crosshairs: women's reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, health care equality and social justice for marginalized populations — all wedge issues in the presidential election.

"I'm not surprised that (the bishops) would attack LCWR," says Jim Fitzgerald, executive

director of Call To Action, which launched the Nun Justice Project, a campaign in solidarity with the LCWR. "The institutional church right now is really trying to purge in a lot of ways. I was surprised at the level and intensity of the attack. The document bluntly says rampant radical feminism had infiltrated LCWR. And specifically pointing out that while doing lots of good things, it has been spending too much time on social justice issues, and not enough time speaking out against same-sex marriage."

Nun Justice — supported by the American Catholic Council, Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church and Catholics for Choice — is calling on the bishops to withdraw the mandate for reform, which it says threatens the nuns' work in social justice. And they are joined by a chorus in support of the women religious. Nun Justice alone submitted 57,000 petition signatures to the U.S. bishops, and has organized prayer vigils and other events across the country, including several vigils outside St. Mary's Cathedral in Portland.

The first men's religious order to stand behind the women was the Franciscan provinces, who called the assessment's tone and direction "excessive, given the evidence raised," and contextually out of date with the "signs of the times." Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest issued a statement in support of the LCWR and called on supporters of both organizations to write their bishops or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and to donate money to a community of local sisters.

Portland's One Spirit-One Call, based out of St. Andrews Catholic Church, works for justice and equality of women in the Catholic Church, and has openly supported the sisters.

"The Vatican should be commending the

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