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sisters, not disciplining them, for carrying out the reforms of Vatican II to modernize and focus on social justice, caring for the poor and marginalized," says Mary Ann Dickey, president of One Spirit-One Call. "We hope that the differences between the sisters and the Vatican can be resolved through dialogue. So far the Vatican has been more interested in handing down edicts than in dialogue."

The mandated reforms of the organization include revising its statutes, the scope of the mission, and all plans and programs including General Assemblies and publications to ensure compliance with the Vatican. (All speakers, for example, will be subject to the approval by the bishops.)

The assessment called into question LCWR's relationship with Network, one of two affiliations the bishops' singled out, the other being The Resource Center for Religious Institutes, which provides the nuns counsel on canonical and civil law.

One major sticking point running throughout the assessment is LCWR's tacit, if not explicit acceptance of the ordination of women as priests, a practice alive and well in the Pacific Northwest and beyond.

What does this mean for the work of women religious in the Pacific Northwest? Perhaps not what the bishops' intended.

"The Vatican, when they issue this doctrinal assessment, has grossly underestimated the power of women religious across this country," Fitzgerald says.

Among the problems named in the report is the LCWR's affiliation with Network, the group's lobbying arm that is not connected to the Vatican. It was Network that came out strongly in favor of President Obama's Affordable Care Act and helped garner support among the Catholic community for the health care reform bill, despite strong opposition to the Act by the nation's leading Catholic body politic, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, or USCCB.

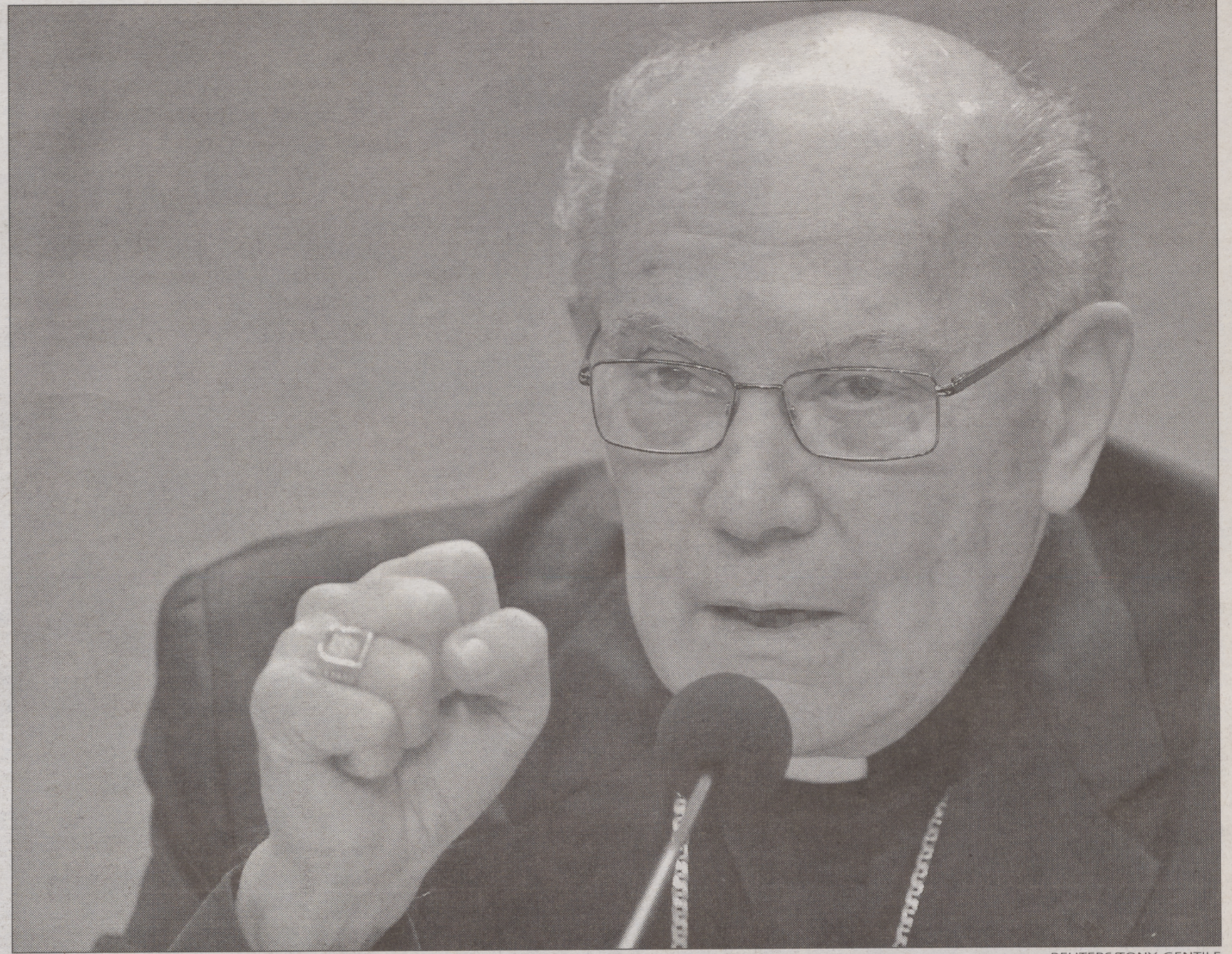
It was also Network that organized this July's Nuns on the Bus event, a multi-state tour by women religious in protest of the budget by Republican Congressman Paul Ryan. The nuns were speaking out against the Ryan budget because, they said, of the harm it would cause to people already suffering from poverty. The tour, which hit mostly Midwest states from mid June to early July, was denounced by the USCCB, who organized the alternative "Fortnight of Freedom" calling for the religious freedom they said was under threat by Obama's health care reform efforts that included insurance for contraception.

The showdown between the nuns and the bishops has Network Executive Director Simone Campbell, who is also a nun, both angry and a little incredulous.

"While I laugh at its absurdity, it is serious, and it is indicative of the attitudes across the country," says Campbell. "It perpetuates the idea that only certain issues are worthy of our advocacy, and those are principally around abortion, and that that's the totality of a justice argument, even though the Catholic documents say clearly that's not the case. And the other piece that's so worrisome for me is that I know we were named in the Vatican document because of our stance on national health care reform. I wrote the letter that the Catholic sisters signed in support of the Affordable Care Act. And it was a position different from the bishops'. And the bishops seemed to be saying not only do they speak for faith, but they also speak for politics. And in a democratic culture, that's wrong. In the monarchy, they can get away with it, but not in a democratic culture."

Campbell sums up the reason behind the backlash against the nuns because, she says, the nuns won.

"It's got nothing to do with faith — it's all about power," Campbell adds. "If their side



REUTERS/TONY GENTILE

Cardinal William Levada, the former Archbishop for the Archdiocese of Portland, gestures during a news conference at the Vatican in 2009. He was the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the Vatican's watchdog on Catholic doctrine, during its investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. He stepped down from the post in July.

had been successful in stopping the Affordable Care Act, this never would have happened."

Fitzgerald notes the difference in perspective.

"(Women religious) look at that issue of life in its fullest," Fitzgerald says. "Whereas the institution looks at it in the most limited lens and quite frankly, the most political lens."

Unlike the LCWR, Network isn't under the Vatican's authority. And the work being done on these issues will continue, regardless of any pressure from overseas, Campbell says. Likewise, one of the options for the LCWR is to recreate itself independent of Rome, as a non-canonical organization.

"I'm a person of faith, and I believe the Holy Spirit is alive and well and making mischief," Campbell says. "What needs to get out, will get out. I'm only a piece of this puzzle."

To better understand that puzzle you have to look back to the 1960s, a time when attitudes about women's rights, sexuality and social justice changed dramatically. The changes were not lost on Pope John XXIII, who convened the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, in 1962 to examine the Church's role in this new world. In summary, Vatican II was the Church's answer to the social liberation happening all around it: "opening the windows and letting in fresh air," as Pope John put it. Meanwhile, with the changing times, women no longer needed the church's money, influence or authority to do the work they felt called to do. The habit became optional, and apparently for some, so did the institution. The Vatican says it was the resulting new-age radicalism that has driven women away from sisterhood. When Vatican II adjourned in 1965, there were 180,000 nuns in the United States. Today there is less than a third that number, and most of those are over the age of 60.

Archbishop Sartain and the bishops working with him to reform the organization have said the assessment isn't a critique of the work of the individual nuns, but of the

organization of their leaders. However, in addition to the Vatican's doctrinal assessment of the LCWR, the Vatican authorized a second, even broader review, called an apostolic visitation, of individual orders and their policies. That concluded in January, with the results yet to be released by the Vatican.

Mary Jo Tully is the chancellor of the Archdiocese of Portland, and the first laywoman to hold that position. She played down the impact of the doctrinal assessment on the work of the nuns or any role the archdiocese would play in what she emphatically described as renewed dialogue between the LCWR and the Vatican.

"I cannot believe that it will change what the sisters do in this archdiocese," Tully said. "And I cannot think that we would want it to."

Still, the LCWR is the major, Vatican-founded, collaborative model to develop leadership among women in the church and the larger society. In addition to concerns over its lobbying arm, Network, and deciding speakers at LCWR events, the bishops have suspended use of the organization's Systems Thinking Handbook. The handbook is described as a roadmap for creating systemic change and has been withdrawn from circulation pending further review by the bishops.

When Fr. Jim Galluzzo of Portland heard about the assessment, he channeled his anger through his artwork. He painted a series of images focusing on women's role in the church, and intends to sell them to raise money for the LCWR. Galluzzo says his education from nuns changed the way he sees people. Like Simone Campbell with Network, he agrees with the political nature of the chasm between the bishops' assessment and the work of the nuns.

"The sisters supported the health care act," Galluzzo says. "They came out again on the side of the poor and people not covered, and that was in conflict of the hierarchy who were not in favor of health care because they felt it was a religious issue."

Galluzzo believes this is where the nuns actually have the moral authority: "Because they deal with the people," Galluzzo says.

"Who are the first people who opened AIDS housing? Look at the people working

down on Burnside, working down at the legal clinic at St. Andrews, working in the soup kitchens," Galluzzo says. "The problem with the Vatican is they are out of touch. They're not working with the people. They've never gone to a grocery store. They don't know the price of milk. They're taken care of."

Father Ron Raab is the associate pastor for Saint Andre Bessette Church. Formerly known as The Downtown Chapel, St. Andre Bessette is where the intersection of the Catholic Church and homelessness is most pronounced and among the most profound in Portland.

Raab is the author of numerous books reflecting on faith and social justice, including his latest book, "The Work of our Hands." Raab's opinion is that regardless of the pressures from Rome, or the Vatican's effort to roll back the modern Catholic model of social justice, the work will move forward.

"I think that the church itself, like everyone else, is afraid of poverty. People are afraid because they are afraid of losing everything. Poverty is such a threat to people," Raab says.

That fear, says Raab, is what's leading to the effort to rein in the work of the nuns back to Catholic dogma. The reality of poverty, however, doesn't fit into a simple mold.

"I think that the Vatican and the larger church, the church in the U.S., they just don't get poverty and the issues behind real people's lives. And for some reason or another, especially in the United States, we've taken this pro-life thing to mean only one thing, when all these issues of life are happening."

For Raab, one of the first lessons is to stop blaming people for poverty.

"I think that's one of the biggest problems that we have because we blame people for their mental illness, for their generational poverty, for having been abused. So people in general think that those things can be fixed, and they cannot be fixed. So when you look at the issues in their lives, they're not fixable, especially when we think their lives should be