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What is on the minds of many U.S. women religious

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 5, 2009

Earlier this week I posted an article [1]on the NCR web site having to do with the second phase of the Vatican-sponsored investigation of U.S. women religious. The article reports that for the first time since the news of the investigation broke last January, the Vatican is saying that it will involve a look at ?the soundness of doctrine held and taught" by U.S. women religious.

I've been receiving emails today from a number of women religious who are not happy with what they feel is in ill-conceived Vatican effort to rein in women religious. These women feel they have been faithful to the church and its mission, have been living out the gospels, have been working on behalf of the poor, have been advocating justice, and have been living at the margins. All in all, they have been faithfully following all the exhortations of the Second Vatican Council.

Meanwhile, some say, the hierarchy has continued to exclude them from all meaningful authority positions, from decision-making that has to do with their own governance, from the hierarchy that has so dramatically diminished itself and church authority by covering up the clergy sex abuse scandal for decades, the very hierarchy that continues to fight efforts to seriously amend its ways, including seeking forgiveness from the wider church community. This is the very hierarchy, these women can hardly believe, that has the gall to investigate them.

What's behind the investigation of U.S. women religious and their leadership umbrella, [2] these women ask.

Is it really about the good of the church? Or is it about some need by the men to re-assert their authority? Or does the investigation involve a desire by insecure men to re-assert control over women who now, having grown up, think for themselves, -- just like the men -- and who are motivated by their own best sense of what constitutes Christian faith and Christian service?

What's not being said here, these woman wonder, as the men, knowingly or not, by ordering the investigation, force open a wider gulf between a male clergy order and a female religious order? If it is fear, as many women tell me they honestly believe, then what is at the foot of this fear of these women?

The women religious who write me wonder out loud if they were ever to be allowed into the inner male authority circles, would the lives and identities of these men be changed forever? Is it all about power? Is it about self-identity? Can it be that these men fear losing their status and protected life styles? And is it that women, just by entering the inner circles, would somehow put an end to this special seemingly self-ordained male sanctum?

It does seem now that these questions will not go away any time soon. The women want answers. And increasingly, one way or another, they will be asking for them, even demanding them. That's what these women religious are indicating in their conversations.

However the investigations turn out, whatever the outcome of the secret reports delivered to the Vatican by its appointed investigators, no matter how stellar the recommendations might turn out to be, they will almost certainly be overshadowed by pressing unanswered questions, products of history, education, awareness, and clerical resistance, begging for answers. That's what these women are saying today.

Clearly, not all U.S. women religious feel this way. But far more do than don't. And with education comes new self-respect and, yes, a rich spiritual liberation, fully Christian, as these women would see it.

I have heard women today talk about the "battered wives' syndrome." And what it is like to go along with something one does not believe in, something one knows is degrading, and yet, hoping upon hope that things get better, continues to accept.

The battered wives' syndrome? There is a much to absorb here, much to ponder. Are any men listening? Are any speaking up? There is so much that is being heaped upon these women that feels so hurtful, so much that is demeaning. Wanting the church to endure, many remain publicly quiet, sometimes fearing than anything said will only bring more pain to their local community. This is what I hear clearly.

And today some of these women religious are noting, incredulously, that the Vatican is asking each investigated religious institute or center of formation to provide hospitality for the visitors and assistants "and, if at all possible, transportation costs related to the visit."

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