

Speak up for our women religious

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Members of the LCWR march through Woldenberg Riverside Park in New Orleans for a prayer service to preserve the wetlands, part of the LCWR's gathering last year. (CNS/Frank J Methe)

U.S. women religious, whose leaders meet in Dallas next month, find themselves in a terrible position. On one hand, they can defend their approach to religious life. Through decades of prayer and work together, they have discerned that approach, articulated in their Vatican-approved charters, as God's call. The process has drawn them deeply into social apostolates through which they have become a powerful representation of Catholic life throughout U.S. culture and the wider world.

On the other hand, they can work quietly in attempting to navigate the institutional shoals, placating those among the hierarchy who believe that a 19th-century model of religious life, shuttered up and held in place by an unthinking acquiescence to a male hierarchy ? mistakenly referred to by some as obedience ? is the salvation of religious life. The option holds the possibility of avoiding a public confrontation and the unpleasant consequences of such a standoff. However, it also holds the likely possibility that religious life in the United States will be re-engineered in secret by the men in the Vatican. It holds the prospect that the soul of a project rooted in and encouraged by the Second Vatican Council would be hollowed out.

The social sciences have a term for the situation of women who feel compelled to be compliant with the men who are bent on demeaning and humiliating them: They call it battered wife syndrome.

So much is at stake in the decisions the Leadership Conference of Women Religious will take about how to proceed because the very integrity of the organization has been called into question with a Vatican-initiated "doctrinal assessment" of its activities.

The doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference, which represents 95 percent of women's orders in the United States, was initiated by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. As much as it is, in itself, an affront to the sisters in the United States, it is all the more insulting because the congregation is headed by an American, Cardinal William Levada. As a former bishop and archbishop in the United States, he certainly could recite, with little prompting, the countless ways religious sisters provided him with an educated, inspired and active church over which to preside. Certainly he knows as well as anyone that the Catholic presence in the wider culture ? from institutions such as hospitals, schools and colleges, to ministries in parishes, and to the

neighborhoods of desperate inner cities ? would be seriously diminished without the sisters whose loyalty he now questions. In that context, the investigation is a shameful betrayal of trust.

The doctrinal congregation's investigation is only part of the nuisance distracting U.S. women religious today. They are also contending with another investigation ? said to be, of course, for their own good ? conducted by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, headed by Cardinal Franc Rodé. The benignly titled "apostolic visitation" is by any other name an invasive probe of how the sisters live and whether they conform to some unspecified measure of what religious life should be. At best, it's a setup. Rodé has several times revealed his conclusions about religious life in the United States, and they are hardly appreciative of what the sisters have done.

Rodé recites the tired shibboleths of a minority who see the future in the enthusiasm of a few small conservative orders that have gone back to habits and regimented community life. That approach is not to be dismissed, but it must also be noted that it has limited appeal. The numbers, by comparison to the alternative, are miniscule. The conservative model should be able to coexist with newer forms of community that involve different levels of membership and a greater role for lay associates. Imagining that the future of religious life resides primarily in a re-enactment of the past is similar to dealing with the priest shortage by insisting on a celibate all-male clergy even if it means raiding other priest-short countries to maintain the impression that all is well.

Underlying all of this, particularly the doctrinal investigation of Leadership Conference, is the basic question: What do bishops hope to achieve?

Before attempting to answer that question, it is necessary to note that the Vatican, in initiating these investigations, is revealing not a crisis in religious life but rather a crisis of the clerical and hierarchical culture.

It is a crisis most graphically depicted in the scandalous behavior of the hierarchy worldwide in its handling of the clergy sex abuse crisis in which bishops systematically and repeatedly chose the preservation of their culture over the lives of children.

In the case of the sisters, what Vatican officials hope to achieve appears to be a forced, public acknowledgement by the sisters that the bishops and cardinals hold all the cards and are the final arbiters of how the women will conduct their lives.

The resultant clash is inevitable. The Vatican that repeatedly extols the dignity of women and whose representative at the United Nations recently argued for the equality of women culturally and economically is the same structure that insists that men, and celibate men at that, are the only humans qualified to make major decisions for the Catholic community. The hypocrisy is embarrassingly evident. The theological and exegetic rationales for such duplicity are by now threadbare and rotting.

Framing the current situation in such stark, adversarial terms may seem to some counterproductive, even detrimental to the sisters and their attempts to work with and reason with the Vatican.

Indeed, there are rich opportunities in these conflicts for seriously exploration of the future of religious life. But to do so in a way that recognizes the work and intelligence of the women involved would require a sea change in hierarchical attitudes about authority, women and what it means to lead a community.

It is impossible to have a dialogue when one side is convinced of the outcome before the conversation begins. It is impossible to have a dialogue when one side believes it is vested with all of the wisdom and answers necessary, when it inherently distrusts changes to the status quo, and when it is convinced that leadership is defined as the ability to control.

Women religious cannot pull themselves out of the quicksand into which they have been thrown. Even while tormented by conflicted loyalties, they still seem to hold on to some hope that someone in the hierarchy will actually hear what they are saying. They are aware, too, that any response they make must take into consideration not only their own convictions and integrity but also the needs of the vulnerable in their communities, especially the elderly. If they have any hope of moving beyond the battered wife syndrome, they need strong, public support of the Catholic community they have so diligently served for decades.

Individuals, parishes, justice groups, alumni groups, all of those who know how different the world would be had it not been for the life of a woman religious need to speak out now and let the Vatican know how much the sisters are appreciated. We all have the power to easily join the discussion and perhaps affect the course of things. Individuals and groups can sign respectful letters and make sure the local bishop and those in the two Vatican congregations conducting the investigations understand the depth of feeling that exists for women who have dedicated their lives to service of the church and others. Send copies of all correspondence to the papal nuncio in Washington.

It is also time for bishops who understand the unseemly politics of the moment, who in private wince at each new insult to religious women, to show some courage. Those who know how dependent the life of their local church is on the service of religious women should end their silence. Speak up. Use your newspapers, Web sites, columns and blogs to highlight the contributions of women religious. You could be taking a first step toward both altering the culture that has brought on this sad episode as well as healing the growing and unnecessary breach between women religious and some members of the hierarchy.

If we want religious women to continue to minister while exploring the possibilities of the future with confidence and integrity, they need to know the church is behind them. Ending up with sisters who feel battered will serve no one and will only bring further shame on an already beleaguered community.

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