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New Vatican leader 'positive on women' in a classic clerical culture way

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Aug. 12, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

Clerical culture's constituents resemble golf club members afraid that women, if accepted, would storm the locker room and see the emperors without their clothes on or the raw truth about monsignors. But also like many golfers they are mostly nice guys with good taste and good manners. And that, of course, is where they get those Catholics who, in the Wagnerian weather of the Ratzinger regime, search for a break in the massive thunderheads that trail back to the lightning filled storm that broke over Vatican I after it voted for papal infallibility and hurried to a close.

Take Fr. Joseph Tobin, the 58 year old Detroit native who has just been appointed Secretary of, take a deep breath, the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life ? AKA the Congregation for Religious. This is the venue whose present prefect, Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rode, authorized the visitation of U.S. women religious that has been rumbling about as subtly as a panzer division through the motherhouses of U.S. sisters who, although they built the American Church, are under siege for, horror of horrors, adapting to the modern world and its spiritual and educational needs.

Tobin is, by all accounts, a genial and experienced priest who served for twelve years in Rome as Superior General of the Redemptorist Fathers. He will be ordained an archbishop when he takes up his post that, according to *NCR*?s John Allen, puts him in the right position to be running the show as Rode, who is already past retirement age, is expected to lay down his mitre soon and step back from the congregation that supervises 190,000 religious priests and brothers and 750,000 sisters all over the world.

Tobin has told Allen that he hopes to give a "different picture" of U.S. sisters that may reflect a consciousness of "just how badly" the Congregation's investigation of women's orders has been received. He is a typical sincere and fair-minded American, anxious to do the right thing. You can't get more American than involving yourself in a war that isn't going well and whose planning was faulty from the start. U.S. sisters never have had weapons of mass destruction, despite Cardinal Rode's whacko ideas that they threatened the faith and good order of Roman Catholicism.

The tough part for Tobin arises from his actually being a loyal member of clerical culture. His promotion depended on his accepting the curial rules of engagement with which he might not personally agree but that he is willing to carry out. Pope Benedict recognized the Romanita that settles as slowly but surely as middle age even on men as American as Tobin after a dozen years of conditioning to the intricacies and compromises of Vatican culture. The pope may well have identified Tobin as his General Petraeus, the right man to fix a war with women religious that the Vatican is beginning to suspect that it cannot win but that it does not want to lose.

If we read Tobin's comments we understand another truth about the benign and gentlemanly style of clerical culture. The best men in it ? the ones who don't look for free passes, parking spaces, or other privileges ? would never think of getting tested for the clerical DNA that they do not suspect they carry within themselves. In *Our Town*, one of playwright Thornton Wilder's characters says that you have "to overhear" the truth about people.

As with many other likeable priests, you have to overhear Tobin to appreciate how, without awareness or conscious intention, he belongs to the great moveable feast of clerical culture. Catch the smoothly worn clericalism in his assertion that "There's a great deal of misunderstanding among American religious about the decisions of the Holy See, and in particular the visitation of women religious."

So it's U.S. religious who misunderstand the visitation! Well, I'll be damned, especially as we read that its organizers' claim that this visitation has reached "phase three," a series of on-site visits to U.S. women's orders that will end with phase four, described as "detailed reports on all 420 'units' of ? orders and their provinces to be sent to" the Congregation of which Tobin will then be Secretary in 2011. Are these, one wonders, those who have been made units for the kingdom of God? Tobin hopes to "bring a fresh perspective ? to that."

The voice of the cleric is heard in the land as he explains the origins of his fresh approach. "I've worked all my life with women religious ..." They taught him as a kid, he continues, and his mother's family was close to the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters. "I've preached women's retreats and listened a lot to them over the years." No doubt the archbishop-to-be cannot hear what we can overhear, a classic cleric's viewpoint on why he understands women in general and women religious in particular. Why, he had them in school and he's preached to them and listened a lot to them. Would it be more reassuring if he told us that he once loved a woman or that he knows the depths of a real relationship with a woman who was not looking down at him at his school desk or up to him in a pulpit?

The fresh perspective needed in this sad episode will not easily come from this good hearted man who, apparently unaware, remains a first citizen of clerical culture. I applaud him on saying that he is "extremely positive" on women. That, however, is an all-purpose statement, a plant that grows in hothouse clerical culture but that lacks roots in the rich soil of the human experience of relating on an equal plane, eyes to eyes, or heart to heart, with a real woman in love, loss, joy, heartbreak, or any other real life situation.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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