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Setting the record straight

Joan Chittister | Jul. 22, 2003 From Where I Stand

Ovid, the Roman philosopher, wrote: "All things change, nothing perishes." In the wake of Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the lesson has gone largely unheeded. The notion lives on that changing a practice undermines the faith. As a result, the struggle for the soul of the church has been a mighty one. Ideas have been stifled, unity has been strained, projects have been crippled, individuals have been crushed.

Nevertheless, scripture itself presents us with stories about good people who set out to do one thing, and then, driven by the Spirit, wind up doing another -- often to their own chagrin.

Jonah, for instance, had no interest whatsoever in going to Nineveh to convert the people there. In fact, he went to Tarshish instead. But, in the end, whale and all, God saw that Jonah got exactly where Jonah was supposed to be and Nineveh was saved.

In her recently published work, *Witness to Integrity* Anita Caspary, president of the Immaculate Heart Community, sets out to put her community's tangled record straight. She tells a modern story of what it means to take off down the road toward a spiritual goal, and to reach it find yourself headed down a different path.

Written 25 years after the Immaculate Heart Sisters of California found themselves forced to choose between edicts of Los Angeles Cardinal Francis McIntyre and the decrees of their General Chapter, the book makes for living history. It also makes for a good many questions about the nature of authority in the church, the place of women, the role of religious life and the definition of church itself.

The book, in fact, is not about "religious life" as much as it is about the way the church operates, often against its own best principles. This book needs to be read by the whole church, not simply by sisters.

This book records the memories of a powerful and empowered woman who found herself and her community to be powerless participants in the development of their own lives.

I was asked to do a "book review" of this work. But having lived through that period myself, I know that for all our sakes at this moment in time, this book deserves more than a simple review. The normal literary questions simply do not apply.

To the question "Is the book well written?" the answer has to be "Who could do it better than the woman who gave her entire life to its doing?" To the question "Is the book factual?" the answer is surely "Who has brought more original documents to the discussion to prove the case?" To the question "Is the book worth reading?" the answer is "Only if the reader wants to understand what it is to live out the ideals of the post Vatican II church from within the continuing mindset of a pre-Vatican II church.

In 1967, more than 600 Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters, a group of highly educated women whose schools and college ranked among the best in the country, found themselves caught between the directives of Vatican II to renew religious life and the mandates of Cardinal McIntyre to cease experimentation and change. Newspapers across the country recorded the whole sordid affair.

McIntyre ordered the community to 1) "adopt a uniform habit," 2) "attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass together every day," 3) "keep in mind their commitment to education, 4) "collaborate with the Local Ordinary in the works of the apostolate" - or, in other words, develop only those ministries he himself would approve. In this case, schools.

All of this came in the face of the Vatican decree mandating a renewal of religious life based on "the charism of the founder, the signs of the times and the needs of the members."

The sisters refused to accept the cardinal's mandates and abandon their work of renewal; the cardinal refused to relent and required their removal from diocesan schools and their dissolution as a congregation; the Vatican refused to negotiate the situation; other authorities, perhaps fearing for their own futures, refused to support the community.

When the dust settled, only 50 sisters decided to accept the cardinal's prescriptions; 132 sisters, weary of the struggle and disillusioned with the church, left religious life all together. Over 400 others committed themselves to the IHM community that remains to this day.

But now they are a new kind of religious community. They are a community of women and men, married and unmarried, Catholics and non-Catholics, all of whom promise their lives to the spiritual ideals of the IHM tradition.

Anita Caspary, past mother general of the original congregation and first president of the new community, is now the 87-year-old voice of the past to the present.

The price paid for such fidelity astounds the average person, professional religious included. The book's most poignant passage describes the sisters' reception of the stacks of dispensations that were distributed for their signing.

Dispensation meant that after having given up everything "for the hundredfold," some of them for over 50 years, they suddenly had no vows, no place to live, no work to do and no means of support -- and no desire to leave religious life.

Caspary writes: "Each sister ... was to sign (an) application (for dispensation) without delay. But in the application form was the statement that the petition for dispensation was made freely. Virtually every sister, without consultation with the others, took one final, important step: she crossed out the word "freely."

The Immaculate Heart Sisters became "The Immaculate Heart Community." Like Jonah these women found themselves on a different road than they had planned for themselves. And because of them, like Jonah, God saved a great deal for the rest of us: sound theology.

Witness to Integrity details the dissolution of the Immaculate Heart Congregation as the world had come to know it. But that is not what the story is about.

The story of the Immaculate Heart Sisters is about the prophetic dimension of religious life and the dignity of women. The community of women changed a lot but, ironically, as Ovid said, nothing really perished.

From where I stand, *Witness to Integrity* is a story about authority and vision. I'll consider the ongoing implications of these in upcoming columns. In the meantime, for your own spiritual development, buy the book and help set history straight.

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