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LCWR earthquake snaps tensions present since Vatican II

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Commentary

It is almost instinctively that one reaches, when attempting to explain what is going on today in the Catholic church, for metaphors out of the natural world -- storms, earthquakes, seismic shifts -- to get at the magnitude of events.

We search for the terms that explain what we're experiencing: phenomena beyond the ordinary disturbances we've learned to weather one season to the next. Just as seismologists or climatologists begin to put together patterns over time, to construct a mega-image of what is happening, so are we. Another piece of the puzzle has just fallen into place for us with the delivery last week from the Vatican of the "Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious."

The 5.8 earthquake that hit the East Coast in August was insignificant by West Coast standards, yet it was felt hundreds of miles from its epicenter in Virginia. Geologists explained that the earth's crust in this part of the world is more dense and less disturbed and fractured than that in the usual earthquake zones, allowing the seismic waves to travel farther than they would, say, in Los Angeles or San Francisco.

In a similar way, the shockwaves emanating from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), a gathering unlike any that preceded it in tone, purpose and language, have reverberated through the relatively undisturbed crust of the institutional church's presumptions and leadership culture. The assessment of the nuns is the latest of the aftershocks. This council, popularly known as Vatican II, did not announce anathemas; did not condemn heresies, as was the case with others; did not dwell on dogma or establish new lines for who's in and who's out of the community.

Instead, to state the matter broadly, it asked that we all go to the roots of who we are as a people of God and to figure out what that means in the contemporary world. And while it is a far more complex story -- indeed, a universe of stories -- than can be done justice in the space of this essay, we can know some things about what's happened since we began to feel the rumblings beneath the ecclesiastical crust.

One of the realities shaping today's news is that the bishops and the nuns took very divergent paths in the wake of the council, and that has set up an unfortunate dynamic. Kenneth Briggs explains the growing tension between bishops and nuns in *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns*. The sisters in the United States, he contends, were largely overlooked in historical accounts of the development of both church and nation because of their "exclusion from positions of power within the Church. Their subjugation to a male clerical order not only kept them out of the public eye but also ultimately crushed their efforts to refashion themselves boldly and creatively."

Many of the problems experienced by women religious in the last half-century, he argues, derive from "the hierarchy's refusal to make good on the promise of renewal" implicit in the council documents.

The rumblings that began to disturb the church's crust in the mid-'60s swelled to a giant heave at the end of that decade with the debate over *Humanae Vitae*. It may seem jarringly inappropriate to raise that old squabble anew and in this context. But it was important and remains relevant. The Catholic landscape was rearranged in a big and unique way. The laity, in this instance, led by their own experience and by prominent theologians, said no. They said they did not accept the church's ban on the use of artificial contraception. And that was that. Little has changed since. That decision, informal but widespread, created quite a rumble. The church stood, minus, perhaps, a gargoyle here and there. God remained in the heavens, and life went on, but a key new insight pervaded those in the pews. The fear of eternal damnation for disregarding a teaching that didn't make sense began to evaporate as a reason to obey.

Religion scholar Phyllis Tickle says global Christianity is going through one of its every-500-year upheavals, when old "carapaces" are cracked and encrustations of habit and practice and belief are jarred loose. In each of those cycles, she says, we're left asking, "Where's the authority?"

The birth control controversy forced that question in a bold and new way in the Catholic world. One senses that just as the United States is trying to find, post-Sept. 11, how power works in a world more shrunken,

interconnected and broken by technology than ever before, so, too, are the bishops trying to figure out how their authority works in an increasingly fractured church where the trappings and presumptions of an all-male monarchy have little hold on the contemporary Catholic imagination. Power and authority no longer function as they once did.

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In the church, no greater challenge exists to hierarchical power and the traditional way of doing things than the sisters. Following the council, the women did what they thought the gathering had mandated: They dug deep into their own histories, reviewed their founding documents, reflected long on the lives and examples of their founders. Many came out of that period of intense prayer and scrutiny with startling conclusions. One of them was that their mission was to be more than cheap labor for the hierarchy.

Another was that, having rediscovered their original "charisms," they saw their work taking them beyond the walls of cloisters and convents and into the wider world, particularly at its margins and among the poor.

An inevitable result of all of the introspection and meditation on their lives, their histories and their missions was a new discovery of themselves as women. In fact, Briggs speaks of them as a kind of pre-feminist movement. Nuns were performing tasks normally reserved for men long before many other women in society. They ran schools and hospitals and other institutions. They were, he writes, "distinguished leaders in charge of big, complex structures. They were, in short, the CEOs of institutions before women were CEOs of institutions."

Thousands were earning college degrees in the 1950s and carrying their new knowledge and skills into a wide range of new professions, says Briggs, who writes that the "total of doctorates awarded to sisters more than doubled" between the 1950s and 1970s.

Through the long arc of their history in the United States, it is a simple fact that women religious built the church. We wouldn't have the Catholic school system without them. We wouldn't have a hospital system without them. We wouldn't today have a Catholic presence in many of the worst parts of our cities without them. We wouldn't have ministry to the displaced, unwanted and hurting without them. In many cases we wouldn't have any ministries or education programs in our parishes and dioceses without them. And in some of the priest-poor sections of the country, we wouldn't have parishes without them.

We are, at the same time, Catholic, and bishops are an important part of our story. So it must be asked, Who would want to be a bishop in today's church? The ground is shifting beneath it in unprecedented ways. The old symbols of power are disappearing. The baronial bishop's residence in Boston has been sold off to pay for the sex abuse scandal; the one in Philadelphia is up for sale. Bishops' authority everywhere is compromised, their moral stature diminished as the world keeps hearing through trial testimony and released documentation how the leadership culture of the Catholic church ignored the horror that was being done to children in order to protect their priests and the reputation of the clerical culture.

For the majority of ordained men alive today, it must seem at times as if nothing is as it was, that what they signed up for decades ago is gone.

And that includes the way nuns act today. It includes the way nuns think today, the fact that they would engage in re-imagining God in the multiple human manifestations that reflect his/her images. That they would entertain questions about women's place in the church, ordination of women, how the church treats homosexuals -- all fly in the face of good order and the community as men have constructed it.

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The eight-page doctrinal assessment -- an indictment, really -- calls into question the lives, motives, spirituality, fidelity, theology and ways of approaching the church and the world of members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an organization representing more than 80 percent of the nation's sisters.

The document is properly anchored in papal quotes about the need for "consecrated persons" to have total "allegiance of mind and heart to the magisterium of the bishops" as did their founders and foundresses. As is often the case, those at greatest risk from a breakdown in presumptions and the surfacing of questions paint church history in crisp, neat lines. But the reality of some of those founders and foundresses is far more jagged and involved a great deal more struggle with the institution and those in power than contemporary papal admonitions to obedience and allegiance would reference.

There's a consequence to the nuns having been the builders of the church, the ones on the ground, the representatives of the church where the hurt is, where people are actually living, being cared for and dying. They're known, they're trusted and they inspire an admiration and loyalty that will not be abandoned in this time of testing.

This should not be a contest between men and women. It shouldn't be a test of who is more important to the church. It shouldn't be a win-lose matter. But the men have forced it to this point.

Yesterday, nuns were approached by Catholics at Sunday liturgies across the country with a simple question: What can we do to help? I am told by one sister that nuns from other countries have sent messages of solidarity, asking if there's anything they can do.

In one parish on the East Coast, a sympathetic message of support for the sisters from the pulpit brought a loud and sustained round of applause. Certainly it wasn't a singular experience. Laypeople everywhere are looking for whatever way they can do to support the nuns. Petitions are circulating in the ether and attracting thousands of signatures.

I'd bet that most bishops really don't want this fight at this time. With all that needs fixing in the church today -- and with the amount of brokenness for which the leadership is responsible -- now is not the time to be casting aspersions on any other groups, and certainly not on the sisters.

The questions the nuns are asking, the topics they discuss, the views they dare express publicly that might be at variance with the bishops emanate from their lived experience as well as their education. Whether the bishops want to acknowledge the fact, they are the same questions and concerns that occupy the community at large, and they're not going to magically disappear.

Xavier Le Pichon, a French geophysicist, is known for constructing a comprehensive model of plate tectonics, but also for extracting from his knowledge of the activity of the earth's plates deep insights into human behavior and the dynamics of human community. In an essay, he writes: "As I knew from my own scientific experience, the weaknesses, the imperfections, faults facilitate the evolution of a system. A system which is too perfect is also too rigid because it does not need to evolve. This is true in politics; it is true within a society, within families, within nature." I think it can be inferred, without unduly stretching the point, that this holds true as well for the Catholic church and its ecclesiology.

A perfect system, he writes, "is a closed system that can only evolve through a major commotion; the evolution occurs through revolutions." In one case, it's the cracking of rigid rocks; in the other, one might extrapolate, it is the slow crumbling of ecclesial systems that have become too rigid or that discover that their usefulness has been overrun by time, circumstance and new insights.

The Vatican assessment has, indeed, begun a "major commotion." In ways that no new evangelization campaign ever could, the critique of the sisters has unified Catholics to rally to a good cause as Catholics, because they are Catholics. They will do whatever they can to protect the nuns. Bishops should be ready for the onslaught of letters and petitions.

The U.S. hierarchy is aiming its rage at the sisters, but the temblors moving the earth beneath their feet have little to do with women who serve the poor and dare to ask unsettling questions.

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