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LCWR: Why are we not surprised?

Robert McClory | Apr. 24, 2012 NCR Today

The attitude toward women that prompted the Vatican crackdown on the LCWR was there in the beginning and it's never been exorcised from Catholicism. It even got into the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians, for example, where the writer declares that women "should keep silence in the churches for they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate. ... If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husband."

Today, we are assured by every credible Scripture scholar that this was inserted by some scribe after Paul's death; it totally contradicts his attitude toward women and his acceptance of women as co-workers. In Romans, he commends an entire list of women, including Junia, whom he calls "prominent among the apostles." Nevertheless, several putdowns of women got placed in the texts and have remained as stumbling blocks for the unwary.

The paintings in the catacombs from the first centuries give witness that women, portrayed in the garments of priests and deacons, even presiding at the Eucharist, shared in the radical equality of the Gospel. But soon the declarations of bishops and synods warn that women should not be ordained and the practice is to be snuffed out wherever it has taken root. The hierarchy alone, they reminded the people (just as they told LCWR), are the deciders.

Mysogony put down even deeper roots, as the teachings of the fathers and doctors of the church reveal [1]. St. Augustine was no exception, nor was the "Angelic Doctor," Thomas Aquinas, who regarded women as "defective and misbegotten" males. This perspective continued as the norm throughout the Middle Ages and even led on occasion to the violent persecution of women as witches; they were, after all, the tools of the devil. With the Enlightenment and the dawn of modernity, old assumptions and superstitions were challenged and began to disappear, but women's role as second-class humans was not so easily put aside. Only in the 20th century was women's right to vote accepted in the Western world.

From the earliest times, of course, Catholic women found a way to follow the Gospel and contribute to church and world through religious orders. Those achievements are astounding by any measure, but the "good sisters" always knew who they were and where they stood in relation to patriarchy, hierarchy and clericalism. Since Vatican II, religious women have risen to new levels of achievement in many professions once essentially reserved to males, and they are taking a critical voice on issues of society, church and even theology, once essentially the realm of males.

The hierarchical mind does not understand this, believing corrections must be made under the watchful eye of men, just as corrections are now under way in the drift that Vatican II reforms have taken -- also with men in charge. The majority of Catholics does understand this, I believe. They recognize the stubborn persistence of the old misogyny and sexism when they see it.

Last Sunday at our church, St. Nicholas in Evanston, Ill., the retired pastor, Bob Oldershaw, praised in his homily women religious for creating in the U.S. "the most successful realization of Catholicism in history." No

sooner had he uttered the words than the entire congregation rose spontaneously as one and began applauding and applauding and applauding. It continued for almost two minutes. It's true we are a clapping-prone parish, but this was unprecedented. When it finally died down, Fr. Oldershaw looked upward and said, "I hope they heard it upstairs." It wasn't clear whether he meant the Vatican, heaven or both.

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[1] http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/resources/women.htm