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The Vatican and the LCWR

Phyllis Zagano | Apr. 25, 2012 Just Catholic

What's left to say? By now the whole world has heard the Vatican is going to take care of those uppity, radical feminist nuns.

Except they're not that uppity. They're not radical feminists. For Pete's sake, they're not even nuns.
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Which is where the problem begins. In the sixth century, a bishop named Caesarius of Arles endowed a monastery for his sister to run, and wrote "A Rule for Virgins." You know, enclosure and all that. For about 1,000 years, that was pretty much the only choice for women who wanted to consecrate their lives to God.

While a few women were also ordained as deacons, any vocation for women soon got stuffed behind fortified walls. Over the centuries, new women's vocations broke through here and there -- the Beguines, Catherine of Siena -- until Mary Ward [1] and others brought defunct diaconal ministries to the alleys and byways of Europe. Eventually, the church recognized this new vocation, now called apostolic, or active religious life -- "sisters" -- as opposed to cloistered, or contemplative, nuns.

To be clear: Step No. 1 in apostolic religious life is consecration; step No. 2 is a professional work or ministry. Women band together to support their consecrated lives, not to form political action groups or law firms. Their institutes, as they are formally known, may have one or another principal ministry in education, hospitals, catechesis or pastoral care. But their first training is to consecrated life, and only later to a work, sometimes in pastoral ministry.

I think the point is lost in Rome, which intuitively sees apostolic women religious as unordained deacons charged with spreading the latest missive from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. That is not how it works.

You know the current story. In Rome well over a year ago, the bishops of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, led by an American cardinal who began his episcopal journey in the now-scandalous Archdiocese of Los Angeles of the 1980s, voted to send LCWR into canonical receivership. Using the time-tested sandbag approach, CDF delivered the news to the three members of the LCWR presidency: Pat Farrell, OSF; Florence Deacon, OSF; Mary Hughes, OP; and LCWR executive director Janet Mock, CSJ, five hours before the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops publicized the report.

That happened in Rome on a Wednesday between 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., as Vatican offices cleared out for *pranzo* and the rest of the day off. The four women -- who in other lives would be heads of corporations, senators or even bishops -- were left standing with spotty Blackberry connections at 7 a.m. Eastern time, not to mention 4 a.m. Western Time.

Actually, sandbagging would be the polite term.

Following several days of "are you kidding?" editorials and letters to the editor in the public press, second-level

commentary is starting to appear. The teams line up fairly predictably: the right (typified by George Weigel) armed with a garbled understanding of LCWR is countered by the left (led by the usual suspects) with a garbled understanding of the ways of Rome.

As it happens, "they" can do it, even to the point of removing LCWR's official status if it does not comply. The Vatican's three hand-picked "assessors" can revise LCWR statutes; review its plans and programs; order new programs; offer "guidance" on liturgical texts and investigate its connections to other organizations -- especially the public policy group NETWORK and the legal and financial counselors at the Resource Center for Religious Institutes.

Great theater here. Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle with Bishop Thomas J. Paproki of Springfield, Ill., and Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, are the men in black. One of Sartain's five older sisters belongs to the conservative Nashville Domincans. Paprocki, an amateur ice hockey goalie, once blamed priestly pederasty on the devil. And Blair, secretary to the archbishop of Detroit around the time of Agnes Mary Mansour [2], was in it from the start.

In fact Blair, together with now-Archbishop Charles J. Brown, the new apostolic nuncio to Ireland, prepared the recommendations to the voting members of CDF.

Neither side is speaking publicly. The two sides may be farther apart, or even closer -- on different matters -- than many glances might reveal. Thankfully, neither the USCCB nor LCWR is staging a public fight over what looms as a painful journey ahead. But the USCCB moved the starting line when it precipitously released the report and turned an internal discussion into a worldwide boys v. girls sideshow.

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