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MSW on LCWR

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 30, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I did not have the visceral reaction many of my colleagues had to the news of the ?assessment? of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious by the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. That was, until I read the document itself. But, before we get to the text, I have to ask myself: Why did I not instantly recognize the injustice many of my friends discerned?

In part, I have learned to resist overbroad interpretations of events that fit neatly with a previously determined meta-narrative, in this case the meta-narrative that sees the bad, old, meanies at the Vatican going after unsuspecting Catholics. I do not recall cries of ?injustice? when the Vatican, in 2000, appointed an apostolic visitor to Mother Angelica?s abbey, although that too involved men assessing women, the far away Vatican bureaucrats ordering U.S.-based women religious to open themselves to investigation and, in the event, resulted in the removal of Mother Angelica from the leadership of her abbey.

In part, I think that these visitations and assessments and other Vatican-sponsored efforts tend to look less bad in the after-light, as has already been the case with the visitation of all women?s religious houses concluded last year. There were cries of outrage, but then?.what? Certainly, the appointment of Archbishop Joseph Tobin to the Congregation for Religious seems to have put the entire episode in an entirely different light.

In part, I have confidence that the Vatican, which is about as traditional a place as can be, has not overnight forgotten its historic vocation as the protector of religious orders in the face of challenges from local bishops.

In part, I grew up in a small rural parish with no school. I did not meet a nun until college and my first direct experience with one came in seminary and it was not a happy experience. Since that time, I have come to know some truly remarkable religious women and admire the work they do, the frequent obscurity in which they do it, and their effectiveness in making the Lord?s healing presence felt in our world.

Mostly, however, and here I may be exposing what some see as my conservative bent, there is a side of me that thinks everyone should be subject to a doctrinal assessment. There has been a lot of truly bad theology the past few decades, and many people have been drinking at those wells. Unlike Mary Hunt, whose article has garnered a great deal of attention [1], I do not think orthodoxy is a concern best described as ?trivia.? Of course, I can think of a few bishops who might warrant a doctrinal assessment, including the USCCB as a whole: More than one hundred years after Cardinal Gibbons could confidently assure the Vatican that the condemned heresy of ?Americanism? was a ?phantom heresy,? some of the statements coming from the USCCB lately have trended dangerously close to making the phantom a reality!

Then, I read the text. It is pretty thin gruel. A 1977 statement here, one line in one talk from a few years back there. As indictments go, I did not see much to justify all the brouhaha. And, as I read the text, I realized why many of my colleagues were right to be upset. If the LCWR had engaged in outright heresy, fine. That is a real issue. But, the evidence contained in the document does not suggest the kind of ?crisis? it claims to see. More importantly, apart from some throat-clearing praise for the work of women religious in the opening paragraph, the document is hardly infused with the love of a good shepherd about which we heard yesterday at Mass. It is

easy to see how women religious felt this indictment was an indictment of their entire lives, and more disturbingly, it is also easy to see how it could have been written in a way that it was not so experienced.

Part of the problem is that these kinds of issues should not be argued on the front pages of the newspaper, as Patricia McGuire pointed out in her very fine essay. [2] ?Certainly, if there is a need for dialogue about differences, have that dialogue in earnest and in private,? she writes. ?But it must be a dialogue, not a threat, and dialogue assumes that both sides are open to hearing the other and even learning from the other.? I have long thought that what the Church desperately needs is a series of internal conversations but in the internet, Youtube age, this seems impossible in any institutional way. Someone will always leak discussions to the press (a thing I wish to encourage in other contexts!) and try to influence the court of public opinion. The only way to cultivate the kind of dialogue McGuire rightly sees as important is to cultivate real relationships between the hierarchs and the sisters. Friends can have private conversations. Whenever any relationship breaks down, there is always plenty of blame to go around but the bishops have a special and unique responsibility to cultivate relationships with their flocks. ?I know mine, and mine know me,? the good shepherd says. I do know bishops who continually reach out to their flocks, who know their clergy, their religious and their laity, but I also know bishops who stay at their episcopal residence most of the time, who fraternize almost exclusively with a few select clerics and only encounter the rest of their flock in superficial encounters. If more bishops would spend some mornings down at the Dunkin? Donuts talking to people, more time inviting groups of women religious to lunch, more time visiting the students at their Catholic schools, well, then, when concerns were raised, they could be raised as they should among friends in Christ, ?in earnest and in private.?

The entire episode also reveals one of the central tensions in the Church today, with roots that go back to the Reformation. Up until the Reformation, there was no doubt that the over-arching Christian moral virtue was caritas, love. It is clear to me, and I think it will be clear to anyone who spends some time with the sisters, that they practice the Christian virtue of caritas in ways few of the rest of us do. I recall visiting a sister who was CEO at a hospital. She had stacks of Medicare regulations on her desk ? not exactly fun reading. I asked about the stack, and she said, ?I became a sister because I wanted to help the poor in Jesus? name. In our day and age, that means that you have to know about Medicare regulations.? I can assure you that it is easier ? and more pleasurable - to change bedpans than to penetrate Medicare regulations. But, the sister described her work without complaint. She was doing what needed to be done to help the poor in Jesus? name.

Of course, when the Reformation came, Luther and Calvin adopted different understandings of human nature which they thought was hopelessly corrupted by sin, save for the saving grace of Jesus Christ. But, a political community needs order, and if humans are incapable of achieving such order out of their pursuit of caritas ? and there was plenty of evidence among the corruptions of the clergy to suggest that Luther and Calvin were on to something ? then the Reformers had to highlight a different Christian virtue and place it at the center of Christian life. ?The most important social virtue among early modern Lutherans and Reformed Protestants, at every social level from disciplined individuals through patriarchal households to well-ordered regimes as a whole, was therefore not caritas but obedience ? newly important given the sobering truth about human nature and the reality of a divided Christendom,? writes Brad Gregory in his new, and masterful, book ?The Unintended Reformation? which I hope to be reviewing later this week. Catholicism, amidst the turmoil of sectarian division, followed the Reformers: While obedience had always been one of the virtues extolled by pre-Reformation spiritual writers, its prominence rose and was also, regrettably, shifted to the State, in early modern Catholic countries. I am all for obedience, and think that one of the difficulties I see in many Catholics of both left and right is that they tend to undervalue the importance of obedience as a Christian virtue, and not just obedience to Christ but, yes, obedience to ecclesiastical authority. But, caritas trumps all, and if you want to find caritas in action, go find a woman religious.

The strangest charge in the assessment was that the sisters did not pay enough attention to pro-life and pro-marriage concerns in their political advocacy. Set aside the fact that when NETWORK fights for higher wages,

and better housing, and better education, those policies do have profound effects on the abortion-rate. At a purely practical level, surely it is unfair to charge NETWORK with failing to address abortion policies and focusing overmuch on anti-poverty programs. Are we to get a document from the CDF complaining the Richard Doerflinger, of the USCCB?s pro-life secretariat, has failed to adequately address housing policy? There is a division of labor within the Church?s structures. No one can be expert on everything.

Now, if the CDF is trying to make the point made by the Holy Father in Caritas in Veritate, namely, that all the Church?s social teachings hang together, that our pro-life stance is an instance of social justice, and our social justice positions are an instance of our pro-life commitment, I am all for that! And, I am all for the insistence, also in Caritas in Veritate, that all of the Church?s teachings on social justice and pro-life activities are rooted in the empty tomb of Jesus Christ! But, let me ask a question: How many bishops do you know who could, if given a sheet of paper, a pencil and five minutes, explain with any measurable coherence what, say, their opposition to same-sex marriage has to do with the empty tomb? I counted about fifteen bishops I know who could do that, and four of them are not in the USCCB. Starting with the LCWR is a strange place to start this quest for a more integral sense of Church teaching rooted in the empty tomb.

Or is it? Because like the women in the Gospel, today?s women religious are usually the first to get to the tomb of Christ. Remember, when they got there, they were not expecting it to be empty. The tomb of Jesus was still a scene of human suffering and human cruelty. The women religious I have come to know still run ahead of the rest of us in getting to the scenes of human suffering and human cruelty. Many, many Catholics have had their faith deepened by the ministry of the sisters. Many, many poor have had their sufferings alleviated by the ministry of the sisters. That must count for something. In the Twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, that is what counts for all.

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