

They Took Leadership and Incurred Wrath

Ken Briggs | May. 1, 2012 NCR Today

The Grudge hardened in 1971 when the superiors of women's religious communities decided to re-name themselves the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The flash point was the word "leadership." The Vatican protested it's use, the superiors overrode the objections and Rome's campaign against "radical feminism" became a fixture in Holy See strategy.

"Leadership" signified a breaking loose from the pre-Vatican II assumption that male clerics had the final say on everything about sisters' existence. They were insisting on a degree of autonomy based on "Perfectae Caritatis," the instructions given them by Vatican II.

The ink had barely dried on the document as the head of the Italian bishops was warning the sisters not to take this freedom too far. That would be abusing official authority. Eventually this became a full fledged attack on renewal as a mindless fling with worldliness, individualism and apostasy.

The move to insert "Leadership" in the association name became a symbolic boiling point. After sticking with their decision, the LCWR went to Rome to explain their rationale. Requests denied.

In what has become part of LCWR legend, Sister Margaret Brennan, then its president, sought an audience with Pope Paul VI to discuss the matter. Refusal was sent not to her but to the head of the U.S. bishops' conference, Cardinal John Krol, who forwarded the message to her.

She asked the cardinal for an explanation.

"He said 'maybe if you were more obedient you'd get in'," she recalled Krol telling her.

Rome stepped up its effort to settle the score. Individual sisters were singled out for censure. When some sisters protested the Vatican's foot stomping repeat of its refusal to accept women to the priesthood, a volley of rebuke met them. Sister Theresa Kane waited until the pope was seated in the cathedral chair in Washington before issuing her response: make women eligible for all ordained offices in the church. Another flap and flurry of charges that the women were "out of control."

By 1983, Pope John Paul II issued "Essential Elements," a code by which "good" nuns who were obedient and "bad" nuns who weren't, a move clearly aimed at the "uppityness" of sisters who were evolving new forms of religious life. The "painful division," as the document called it, was "irreconcilable."

A year later came the first investigation of the thought and behavior of American sisters which found, not surprisingly, a growing gap between the sisters and their would-be (often dyspeptic) Roman overseers.

None of that achieved the goal of quashing the "leadership" itch and the 1995 Synod of Bishops on the subject didn't help matters either with its endless patter and inconclusiveness. On his return, Cardinal John O'Connor, an

insider to the synod, erupted with indignation at this display of determination by the women to stay the course.

Speaking to a traditionalist group, the cardinal decried the continuation of "radical feminism" among sisters and accused them of plotting a power grab to pursue their own selfish ends. Did someone say "power"?

And so the sniping and grudging continued up to the 2009 announcement of the dual investigations aimed at rooting out the resistance. All along the methods have borne the marks of male privilege recalcitrance. The demand is for surrender, for submission, for subordination of the gifts that women religious bring to the guidance of ordained males.

The huge outpouring of support for the sisters in the wake of the latest ham-handed attempt to rope them back in has the appearance of "vox populi" and therefore hard to imagine overturning. It might even be the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The rally, welcome as it is, also reflects a slightly disconcerting element. Many of the replies celebrate services in hospitals and schools that most sisters haven't provided for decades. Their gratitude is no less deserved, but I hope it's accompanied with some understanding that Renewal reshaped all that into ways of living the supporters also endorse. Otherwise, the well intentioned advocacy of LCWR becomes, ironically, an embrace of a continuing convent-centered existence that nobly does nurse and teach but opposes practically everything the LCWR sisters stand for. They belong to the rival group, the Conference of Major Superiors of Women who have strong objections of their own to the alleged "radical feminism."

Asserting "leadership" meant that the ranks of outstanding LCWR women had to stay the course of Renewal while fending off The Grudge. I believe the constant disapproval of their methods and aims cost them and their communities dearly. Without the protracted attempt to settle the grudge, they might have been able to achieve more and enhance the viability of their communities.

[Ken Briggs is author of *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns.*]

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