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Abusive ecclesial authority puts our bishops on the spot

by Thomas C. Fox

COMMENTARY

Some of our bishops are acting like bullies, abusing the authority of their offices in the name of enforcing orthodoxy.

Dealing with U.S. women religious, these bishops' actions appear governed more by a desire to enforce obedience than to develop fidelity in our sisters.

Catholics see through this guise. They are upset, fed up with the likes of this behavior. They are speaking out. Soon they will be on the streets making their voices heard. You can count on it.

What the bully bishops claim to be matters of orthodoxy are really matters of pastoral style. They are the results of an unwillingness among our bishops to enter into sincere and mutually respectful dialogue with the women. None of the issues at hand has anything to do with the Creed. They stem from the actions of a small group of misdirected and fearful men determined to take catholic out of Catholic while judging, silencing and demeaning those who stand in their way.

Most of our bishops are not part of this clique. Most find themselves in near-impossible situations, part of a culture that demands they accede, at least publicly, to these abusive actions, knowing full well they are draining life and spirit out of the very women -- these exemplary, faithful women -- who sustain their diocesan and parish communities.

Against the best interests of their local churches, our bishops keep their silence, cognizant that if they speak up in support of the sisters, they will be removed from their positions, as have other bishops who have spoken out against the bullying.

This is an especially difficult time for Catholics who recognize the need and place for legitimate church authority in a world in need of Gospel guidance. Catholics and others cannot help but see the episcopal attacks on our sisters in the context of decades of sexual abuse cover-up. Why, they ask, point the finger at the women when the times demand deep critical self-introspection?

On April 18, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith "stunned" the women with a highly critical "doctrinal assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents 80 percent of more than 50,000 of our U.S. Catholic sisters, accusing them of focusing too much time on the poor and not enough on abortions and gay marriage.

One of the beauties of our Catholic faith is that we agree on the Gospels, the Creed and the Eucharist and often disagree on theologies and pastoral approaches. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, supporting a seamless pro-life ethic, used to say it was healthy that different elements in our Catholic communities would focus on varied aspects of the life garment and that no one person or group could effectively focus on all elements.

His approach to authority and building community within our church -- dialogue and moral persuasion -- has been rejected by bishops who now demand total assent of word and conscience "or else," an approach our sisters cannot accept while remaining true to their identities, methods and missions.

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For decades now, our sisters have been agents of their own destinies, living and working faithfully, attending to the needs of the neediest among us. They have done it with the scarcest of resources, living out the charisms of the orders, charisms renewed at the wishes of the bishops following the Second Vatican Council a half-century ago. They have labored largely without the financial assistance of their bishops, but in concert with them.

These sisters are today's objects of ecclesiastical abuse, but they will not in the end become its latest victims. This is because they will refuse to perpetuate the abuse. Products of years of prayerful discernment of purpose and mission, they know who they are and who they cannot become. They are at peace with themselves, a peace that draws from prayer, self awareness, community and the gospels to which they have given their lives.

Yet there are worries. Mercy Sister Camille D'Arienzo, in an email this week, put it this way: "Because sisters work to help people who struggle on the margins on society, my concern is that, in the end, the attack on the LCWR becomes an attack on the poor."

While the LCWR leadership is taking time before it responds to the Vatican edict, this, too, should be a special time for episcopal discernment. The bishops have become the Vatican doctrinal assessment's silent victims. This is because it is causing disruption and discouragement throughout local dioceses. The sisters upon whom the bishops heavily rely to keep their parishes functioning are now both dispirited and alienated.

The bishops need to speak out against this ill conceived and ill executed but very hurtful behavior. They need to speak out on behalf of the sisters whom they well know to be faithful servants of the church - no matter what the orthodox police might allege.

But so far the bishops are largely silent.

This is the same silence we found after the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee offered its devastating critique of theologian Sister of St. Joseph Elizabeth Johnson's book, *Quest for the Living God*. The critique found every fault possible, but the worst part of that sad story was that during the one year the committee studied the Johnson text, it never once contacted her for comment or defense, nor did it take the time to enter into respectful dialogue with her after the fact.

This is the same silence that occurred after Vatican officials disregarded our bishops' efforts to represent the prayer lives of U.S. Catholics in the sacred words of the Mass, after our bishops passed a suitable translation.

It would have been so soul-lifting and empowering if our communities had a number of bishops step forward to publicly represent local Catholic sentiments in these most personal and communal matters. But that never happened.

Last week, Bishop Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., wrote a column on his diocesan website, addressing the women religious situation. We should commend him for saying something.

In his essay, he recognized what he found as dysfunctional behavior on the part of the Vatican, but did not speak out against it.

His instinct was for reconciliation, but he could not bring himself to say the Vatican had conducted itself in an unacceptable manner.

Lynch wrote that our sisters, the critical doctrinal assessment notwithstanding, are faithful women who "have played and continue to play an extremely important and vital role in the life of our church," holding "positions of trust, leadership, and competence." In a Pinocchio-nose-stretching moment, he adds that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's statement "did not and could not call into question the great work of these women."

Lynch went on: "I like many of you reading this, love the sisters," adding, as if an aside, that "from time to time, various offices of the Holy See have taken it upon themselves to investigate and attempt to change other bodies extant in the church."

He might have added they have done so at immense harm.

He recalled that in the mid-1980s, the Vatican had in its sight the national episcopal conferences (the most visible mechanisms of Second Vatican Council collegiality) "due in no small part to (Vatican) concern about the growing influence in the public square of the United States Catholic Conference, which was garnering worldwide attention and acclaim for the twin pastoral letters on war and peace and the economy."

In other words, the U.S. Catholic bishops were influencing the wider U.S. conversations on war and the economy. They were becoming an effective collective episcopal voice within the wider church. This should have been something to celebrate. Yes?

Lynch writes: "Not lost on certain people in Rome was the fact that a picture of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago (and chair of the committee which wrote the pastoral on war and peace) appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine before that of Pope John Paul II."

With a sort of "If it can happen to us it can happen to you" explanation, Lynch says that episode ended in a document from the Holy Father "defining the limits of the teaching authority of episcopal conferences."

He adds that it seemed "like the sun was crashing down on post-conciliar collegiality but in the end, little changed." Little changed? We have had a toothless conference of almost toothless bishops since that time.

The Vatican under Pope John Paul II emasculated national episcopal conferences, the principle countervailing forces against Vatican centralization of authority. After a 1998 edict, the conferences could only speak out authoritatively on matters of faith and morals if they did so with unanimous consent, which is impossible to get.

The Vatican had taken back what the Second Vatican Council offered the church in an attempt to help decentralize authority and move it into greater harmony with the modern world.

It takes little imagination to connect those actions with the April 18 CDF doctrinal assessment. With formal collegiality ended, with local voices expressing local faith experiences being extinguished, the quickly changing conditions of women, especially in the West, could more easily be overlooked. And the distance between U.S. sisters and Roman prelates would only grow, to the great peril of our church.

In his column, Lynch defended -- and tried to explain -- the Vatican, writing that if someone does not understand "the praxis of the Holy See, it would seem that the Holy Father dislikes American religious women." He admits that several actions would seem to reinforce this conclusion.

But he doesn't agree. The apostolic visitation, another recent Vatican initiative questioning the fidelity of U.S. women religious, seemed to many like "doomsday," yet that has not and is likely not to be the case, he wrote.

He did not explain that this doomsday scenario was avoided not because the Vatican changed its mind, but because the sisters refused to cooperate in their own execution.

They refused to be bullied.

Lynch then tried to share that inscrutable Vatican "praxis," which includes a pattern of poor communication and a pecking order in Rome that keeps outsiders at bay.

Referring to the Congregation for Religious, which is canonically the authority that is supposed to be overseeing the religious orders of the world, Lynch wrote: "I would bet a dollar to a donut that they knew little to nothing about last week's paper from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in advance. That is not the way things work over there -- there is 'turf' protection and a pecking order of significance and competencies among the various Congregations and Councils."

He did not write that if this is true, it is a disgrace -- little boys fighting over their tree houses while the church burns.

He does make some big admissions, which point to serious dysfunction at the top of the church.

And yet he does not side, even in matters of abusive process, with the sisters.

The concerns Lynch addressed are clear disabling elements of the highest order and should quickly draw widespread episcopal attention.

As you might expect of a good shepherd, Lynch has tried to attend to the sisters' sense of rejection: "So my words to my sisters in this diocese would be to relax somewhat. You are still loved and appreciated by your church. The appointment of an incredibly fair and compassionate man like Archbishop Peter Sartain (the Vatican-appointed overseer) to see this process through is a hopeful sign in itself."

No one disputes that Sartain is a compassionate man. The question is, Can he identify and speak out against injustices within the episcopal ranks? Can he address, identify and speak out against abusive behavior?

"American Catholics who read the secular media," Lynch writes, "are getting an introduction to how terribly the media understand the Church. Editorials have appeared all over the place supporting the sisters and condemning the Pope, Rome, bishops, men, etc., etc. The notion of a hierarchical Church is both foreign, inimical and anathema to current liberal, freethinking and secularist thought."

No, patriarchal tyranny is inimical to modern egalitarian fairness and honesty.

So it's the media's fault. Criticize the messenger. The media has almost universally sided with the sisters. They have tried to tell it like it is. If the Vatican comes off looking like a dictatorship, it might be because elements within it are acting like dictators.

For some reading this column, Lynch's heartfelt apologies and explanations seem to have a familiar ring. That is because they highlight the behavior of a victim living in an abusive relationship.

The syndrome associated with these relationships is often called "battered wives" or "battered women's syndrome." Sadly, many women know this syndrome only too well. Many have experienced battering at some point in their lives.

While it sometimes takes a Herculean effort, many spouses suffering such abuse manage to break away. They say "no more" to the unacceptable behavior and walk away.

According to those in the field of marriage counseling, the prime characteristics of the syndrome are these: The object of the abuse comes to believe it is somehow justified; the object of the abuse accepts it, fearing that to do otherwise would only make matters worse; the object of the abuse lives with an inflated sense of the power of the abuser, making it all the more difficult to take appropriate action.

I do not imagine Catholic prelates who have given their lives to our church see themselves as violent abusers. Similarly, I do not imagine that Lynch believes he is in any way an enabler of abuse.

But like other bishops he appears locked in, a prisoner of the system. It is a system currently characterized by male exclusiveness, dictatorial conduct and demeaning actions. At the moment it is causing much harm to the wider Catholic community and mission.

This abuse of authority will end only when our Catholic communities, led by caring bishops, stand up against it, and speak out on behalf of procedures and conduct more characteristic of Christian communities.

Until then, abusive authority will remain like an unwanted cancer, depleting life from the Body of Christ.

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