NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Catholic family, we have a problem

Robert McClory | May. 17, 2012 NCR Today

There's something troubling and neurotic about the aggressive campaign the institutional church is waging these days. Orders are given and compliance is expected from the highest levels down to the lowest. Clearly, "the reform of the reform" Pope Benedict XVI called for a few years ago is moving forward at an accelerated, almost frantic kind of pace.

In the United States, we have the no-nonsense demand that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious place itself under the control of an archbishop, aided by two lesser bishops, so serious abuses can be eradicated. Among those cited are "corporate dissent" and "radical feminist themes" that occur at LCWR assemblies.

At the international level, new rules have been imposed [1] on Caritas International, the umbrella organization over Catholic charitable agencies in the world. A pontifical council must henceforth approve any Caritas texts with doctrinal or moral content, and top Caritas officials are required to take loyalty oaths. All this follows the ousting of the Caritas secretary-general, a laywoman.

The Vatican is reportedly about to clamp down on the availability of marriage annulments. The head of the Roman Rota recently criticized the practice of broadly interpreting Canon 1095, which allows the nullification of marriages because of "psychic causes." Two-thirds of all annulments in the world are presently granted to U.S. Catholics each year.

At the national level, our bishops continue to ratchet up their indignation about the Obama administration's insurance coverage mandate, presenting it as an anti-Catholic attack on religious liberty and threatening to promote widespread disobedience among loyal Catholics in the face of a secular, oppressive government.

In several states there are serious, hierarchy-supported and endorsed efforts to persuade voters to reject same-sex marriages at the ballot box and, in some cases, domestic unions, too, so the church's official teaching on gay issues can be imposed on the general public, Catholic or otherwise.

Meanwhile, at various local levels, repressive action is in the wind. In Madison, Wis., the bishop has threatened to place parishioners at one parish under interdict, thus denying them reception of the sacraments. The cause is their complaints about the new priests from Spain at their church who bar girls from serving at the altar and laypersons from distributing Communion. In Belleville, Ill., the bishop has removed from active service a veteran priest who adds occasional words of commentary or clarification at Mass.

The list could go on indefinitely: Irish priests silenced, Australian bishop removed from office for raising the topic of women's ordination, feminist theologian's book excoriated and, of course, the investigation of the Girl Scouts!

The church's credibility in the eyes of many, many Catholics has become so thin you can practically see through it, as the church sheds members at a record pace. The institution is like a deeply troubled parent obsessed with a

rage for order, and is thus in grave danger of permanently harming himself and the members of the family. If this were a real human family, its responsible members would be gathering together to consider the kind of help "Dad needs." And at minimum, wouldn't there be some urgent discussion of a possible intervention before matters get worse?

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