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On Cardinal Levada's right hand, the visionaries -- on his left, women religious

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | May. 24, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side

I have pleasant enough memories of Cardinal William Levada who, as a young worker bee in the hive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, helped me find my way through the dim warrens of the old Holy Office when I was questioned there more moons ago than I can now count. I cannot erase my gratitude despite his persistent efforts, now that he runs the whole waxworks of the congregation, to make me, along with millions of others, wonder if he lets his right hand know what his left hand is doing. Or perhaps that is exactly what bright young clerics must learn to do if they are to reach their career goals.

Cardinal Levada -- I would call him Darth, but *NCR*'s editor won't let me -- has, of course, also had to master a straight face when issuing, as he did this week, updated norms [1] originally drafted when Paul VI was pope "regarding the manner of proceeding in the discernment of presumed apparitions or revelations."

These regulations, he asserts, will help pastors "in their difficult task of discerning presumed apparitions, revelations, messages, or extraordinary phenomena of presumed supernatural origin." The norms, he avers, should also "be useful to theologians and experts in this lived experience of the Church, whose delicacy requires an ever-more thorough consideration."

Most pastors are too busy easing the broken hearts and patching the leaky roofs that constitute the real "lived experience of the Church," as indeed are most theologians who are trying to be true to the lived experience of theology in the world, to let themselves get involved with, much less ever be approached by, people insisting they see things nobody else does.

Everyday Catholics -- the people with a simple, hard-bought vision of what is demanded of them to be faithful and true to their word, their spouses, their families and their work -- give us an example of how the sense of the faithful manifests itself and how we can confidently follow it.

When the average Catholic, keeping the faith despite the sexual and financial scandals whose truth the official church has been slow to test and whose causes it still refuses to seek out, sees somebody spread-eagled in front of a supposedly bleeding statue or somebody else praying for long hours, arms outstretched, or a figure floating in strange self-constructed gear up the center aisle for communion, they don't pay any attention. Good people believe that, as long as such persons, who seem to be in training for the "rapture," are not setting fires, or as Mrs. Patrick Campbell said in another century in another context, "scaring the horses," they should be left alone.

Not all persons claiming to have visions or messages are like this, of course, but it is instructive to note how, with the right hand, Cardinal Levada invites such claimants for a closer look and a tentative blessing, while with the left, he delays women religious with a border guard's signal and treats them like the usual suspects while he carefully studies their passports.

While the great achievements for the church of women religious are ignored, as are their lives of personal

sacrifice, and they are presumed guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors for such things as allowing speakers at their assemblies to speak of cultural realities that everyone can see, such as feminism, those who claim to see things that nobody else can see, and that, in fact, might not be there at all, are treated far more respectfully.

Those examining them, according to Cardinal Levada, should give good marks to vision claimers for their ?personal qualities,? including their ?psychological equilibrium and rectitude of moral life?? You need not be an expert to observe these qualities in American women religious who, on the basis of their goodness, built the Church in the United States.

Visionaries, according to these norms, are apparently only verifiable if they demonstrate "habitual docility towards Ecclesiastical Authority" and that their visions or messages are "immune from error." There is a mix-up here, because the latter are the criteria for becoming a bishop and have no application to really saintly people or visionaries. St. Catherine of Siena, who confronted the pope of her time, would have to be removed from the heavenly rolls if these criteria were to be taken seriously.

America's women religious easily fulfill the criterion of "healthy devotion and abundant and constant spiritual fruit (for example, spirit of prayer, conversion, testimonies of charity, etc.)." Women religious are even good at that et cetera, whatever that means to the good Cardinal Levada, who should remember and thank the nuns who may have taught him before subjecting them to monitoring by a trio of American bishops who have manifested that docility to Ecclesiastical Authority but have not been noted as exemplars of any of these other criteria.

The good cardinal has revealed something that you need not be a visionary to see, that Rome is more interested in the easy obedience of so-called visionaries who see things that might not be there to women whose creative energy has been expended in serving a world whose wounds and needs they see with Gospel clarity. They are too busy with these things they can see to have time seeing things that aren't there. Extraordinary visions and special messages are not necessary for Christianity, and those who receive them generally do not seek attention from Rome or anyone else.

Perhaps Cardinal Levada should call off the bishops so carefully examining America's women religious and recall what one of the greatest woman religious of all time, Teresa of Avila, said, when she went on visitation to a convent from which reports of visions had come, "Believe me, they won't be seeing visions after I get there."

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