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Cleveland priest on "What the Nuns' Story is Really About"

Alice Popovici | May. 29, 2012

A reader emailed *NCR* the following article from the parish bulletin of the Blessed Trinity Catholic Church in Cleveland, Ohio. We're posting it with the permission of the author, Fr. Doug Koesel:

What the Nuns? Story is Really About

Many of you have asked me to comment on the recent investigation into the US nuns. Here goes. In short, the Vatican has asked for an investigation into the life of religious women in the United States. There is a concern about orthodoxy, feminism and pastoral practice. The problem with the Vatican approach is that it places the nuns squarely on the side of Jesus and the Vatican on the side of tired old men, making a last gasp to save a crumbling kingdom lost long ago for a variety of reasons.

One might say that this investigation is the direct result of the John Paul II papacy. He was suspicious of the power given to the laity after the Second Vatican Council. He disliked the American Catholic Church. Throughout his papacy he strove to wrest collegial power from episcopal conferences and return it to Rome.

One of the results of the council was that the nuns became more educated, more integrated in the life of the people and more justice-oriented than the bishops and pope. They are doctors, lawyers, university professors, lobbyists, social workers, authors, theologians, etc. Their appeal was that they always went back to what Jesus said and did. Their value lay in the fact that their theology and their practice were integrated into the real world.

The Vatican sounded like the Pharisees of the New Testament;?legalistic, paternalistic and orthodox? while ?the good sisters? were the ones who were feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, educating the immigrant, and so on. Nuns also learned that Catholics are intuitively smart about their faith. They prefer dialogue over diatribe, freedom of thought over mind control, biblical study over fundamentalism, development of doctrine over isolated mandates.

Far from being radical feminists or supporters of far-out ideas, religious women realized that the philosophical underpinnings of Catholic teaching are no longer valid. Women are not subservient to men, the natural law is much broader than once thought, the OT is not as important as the NT, love is more powerful than fear. They realized that you can have a conversation with someone on your campus who thinks differently than the church without compromising what the church teaches. (For example, I could invite Newt Gingrich here to speak. You?d all still know what the church teaches about divorce in spite of him) Women religious have learned to live without fear (Srs. Dorothy Kazel, Maura Clark, Ita Ford) and

with love (Mother Teresa). And the number of popes and bishops and cardinals following in their footsteps, Jesus? footsteps, is_____?

This is what annoys American Catholics. The Vatican is hypocritical and duplicitous. Their belief is always that someone else needs to clean up their act; the divorced, the gays, the media, the US nuns, the Americans who were using the wrong words to pray, the seminaries, etc. It never occurs to the powers that be that the source of the problem is the structure itself. We can say that now with certainty as regards the sex abuse crisis. It was largely the structure of the church itself, the way men were trained and isolated, made loyal to the system at all costs and not to the person, that gave us the scandalous cover-up.

US nuns work side by side with the person on the street. They are involved in their everyday lives. Most cardinals spent less than five years in a parish, were never pastors, are frequently career diplomats.

Religious women in the US refuse to be controlled by abusive authority that seeks to control out of fear. They realize that Jesus taught no doctrines, but that the church, over time, developed what Jesus taught in a systematic way. Nuns have always tried to work within the system. This time their prophetic voices may take them out of the system. They may take a lot of Catholics and a lot of their hospitals, schools, colleges, orphanages, prison ministries, convents, women?s shelters, food pantries and, of course, the good will they have earned over the centuries with them.

This investigation is not about wayward US nuns. It is the last gasp for control by a dying breed, wrapped in its own self-importance. It is a struggle for the very nature of the church; who we are, how we pray, where we live, who belongs, why we believe. The early church endured a similar struggle. The old order died. The Holy Spirit won. Happy Pentecost Sunday!

P.S. On Wednesday, May 30, there will be a prayer rally for US nuns at St. Colman on W 65th St. All are invited and encouraged to attend. The nuns were there for us. Let us be there for them.

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