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Editorial: Sisters' discussions reflect healthy questioning

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Many of us educated in Catholic schools encountered women religious who modeled and taught us both the inner life that gives birth to and nurtures religious experience and how to discern whether those experiences were ?of God.? They offered us an inclination toward Gospel life and the contemplative together with the catechism.

The sisters challenged us with concepts like social justice, offered good stories and poetry that pushed wider the circumference of our world. In various vibrant ways, they taught us that things had an inside as well as an outside, that we each had souls as full of pep as our bodies, that the best, truest adventures are the inner, questioning ones.

The dispute between the Vatican and U.S. sisters represented by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) indeed plays out in that healthy tension between faithfulness to the living Gospel and to our personal religious experience and the concomitant necessity for a reliable body of wisdom, even orthodoxy, against which those individual experiences can be tested and validated.

In the years after Jesus? resurrection, the early church?s task was steering a wise course through the disputes over the nature of divinity, of the Trinity, of how Jesus could be both God and human. Church councils were called to descry from the scriptures and experience and put into words the common faith, forming a bedrock. Because our faith is grounded in what are essentially deep mysteries, this bedrock, like the Earth?s, is somewhat malleable and porous, as evidenced by the 1950 inclusion of Mary?s bodily assumption into heaven into doctrine.

Our present world -- its exciting new scientific discoveries, plurality of religious views, melding of cultures, its daunting environmental and ethical challenges -- has moved this necessary tension between spiritual and theological exploration and orthodoxy to the front and center.

Writing for the online magazine Religion Dispatches about the Vatican taking LCWR into receivership, feminist theologian Mary Hunt said, ?The truth is most Catholics no longer look to Rome for guidance on our personal lives ... nor do we live within the narrow confines of a cultic Christianity, or, as women, accept male leadership and priestly ministry as if theirs were God-given and ours were not. We appreciate the complexity of these matters and strive to create forums in which to listen, discuss, discern, and pray.?

The Vatican?s eight-page doctrinal assessment document mentions that addresses given at LCWR assemblies manifest problematic statements and serious theological, even doctrinal errors, citing a specific passage from Dominican Sr. Laurie Brink?s address about some women religious ?moving beyond the church? or even beyond Jesus. ?This is a challenge not only to core Catholic beliefs; such a rejection of faith is also a serious source of scandal and is incompatible with religious life,? reads the document.

In context, Brink was mapping possible directions for religious communities as they move forward in this new century. ?Moving beyond the church? referred to a Wisconsin Benedictine community that indeed did withdraw

itself, in accordance with canon law, from the hierarchical jurisdiction, and lives out its monastic life independently.

Another option Brink looked at involves ?reconciliation for the sake of the mission.? Sisters can recognize that they are ?ecclesial women,? and attempt to reconcile themselves with the church.

Such a probing, balanced discussion is surely the fruit of that Catholic education and formation that offered both catechism and discernment processes to questioning minds.

The speakers at recent LCWR assemblies include Cokie Roberts, Shawn Copeland and St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson. They talked on topics such as pursuing holiness in the 21st century; radical openness, suffering and the grace of prophetic hope; and embodying holy mystery. One speaker talked of religious life as an unfolding mystery. All of this is in the best tradition of Catholic spiritual and theological seeking.

The Vatican document also mentions ?a prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith? in some LCWR programs and presentations.

In answer, psychologist and ethicist Sidney Callahan identifies the Gospel feminist as ?a Christian feminist who aspires to the radical commitment that manifested itself in abortion debates as ?pro-life feminism,? and in just war arguments as a dedication to Christian nonviolence.? She adds: ?It is a given that gospel feminism adheres to Catholic social teachings on equal rights, dignity and justice for all.?

Gospel feminism may be radical, indeed, challenging to the roots the prevailing culture?s presumptions about such matters, but there is nothing in it that is incompatible with Catholic teaching. Such are the stances that healthy questioning and seeking brings many Catholics to, sooner or later.

The assessment document mentions ministry to homosexuals as well. U.S. sisters have long been living and ministering where church moral teaching meets reality in the world, and attempting to craft effective pastoral responses.

Seattle?s Archbishop Peter Sartain, named as the reform overseer, has promised ?ample opportunity for conversation and dialogue about these issues.?

The sisters will have much to tell him, as this dispute continues to unfold.

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