

In Case He Hadn't Been Perfectly Clear

Ken Briggs | Jun. 12, 2012 NCR Today

Civility without honesty is no virtue. The LCWR sisters on their mission to Rome say they were received politely by Cardinal Levada and his team. They were apparently offered comfortable chairs and presumably welcomed to an elegant table with bottled water, fresh flowers and smiles from their hierarchical overseers. They were allowed, swarthed in courtesy, to speak their pieces.

But later in his debriefing by John Allen it was clear that behind the friendly facade was a stone cold demand that the sisters relent entirely to the will of the cardinal's censoring report. He was, shall we say, pissed. The LCWR hadn't shown mandatory concern for the indictment, the cardinal said. Evidently he found no reason to hope in the meeting and, figuratively speaking anyway, there was steam piping from his ears.

If they didn't back down, he warned, the CDF might toss them out of the canonical ranks and "substitute" a compliant group. For some strange reason, the cardinal said the replacement group was anybody's guess, as if the Vatican had not certified the rival Conference of Major Superiors of Women in America two decades as a wedge against LCWR and the favorites.

Listening is a priceless gift when the hearer is willing to be affected by the words and their meaning. When those in authority in the church began to use the language of listening after Vatican II there was reason to hope that two-way conversation might be possible. On occasion it's gone in that direction, roughly, but in order for anything creative to happen both sides need to be willing to change as the result. Otherwise, it's likely to become just another disengenuous form of patronizing -- dialogue fraud.

From afar, it seems highly probably that there wasn't much real listening going on in Rome, just cross talk.

The result isn't a stalemate because that would imply a contest between matches opponents, not intellectually or ethically, to be sure, but in terms of sheer power. Though the powerful sometimes try to shame the powerless against ever using that word "power" as unseemly and unbecoming women servants of God, those who have it have no hesitancy. Cardinal Levada quickly threw the "throw them out" trump card.

What will the legions of lay Catholic people do now? So far there have been many and widespread shows of support for the sister but at little or no cost. Now that the Vatican grip has tightened and the cardinal has played his threat, is it reasonable to expect that Catholics might be willing to sacrifice something to stand behind the sisters? What would sisters want them to do? Is that once great inclination by both sisters and the rest of the laity to grant the bishops, or the course of history, or American optimism the benefit of the doubt -- as if certainly "they" would respond to good will or charitable instincts -- is that fast running out? The LCWR would seem to be in a tight corner. Will they be alone when the immediate sensation dies down and the emotional fever levels off?