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Sisters: Open the Doors

Kristine Ward | Aug. 7, 2012 Examining the Crisis

We know the 900 Sister leaders representing 320 religious communities at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) have a full plate for their meetings that begins today in St. Louis.

We don't think anything on the plate should keep the Sisters from opening the door to the survivors that will be outside the hotel where they are meeting.

The Sisters are made of strong stuff. Plenty of Catholics have attested to that in the public discussions in both the religious and secular news media regarding the Vatican and the Sisters, before, during and after the recent Nuns Bus Tour, as well as in multitudes of private conversations.

We are not saying that the support is not justified.

We are saying that the Sisters, to date, have chosen the Bishops' route for the most part in dealing with sexual abuse by their members: silence and lawyering up.

We are also saying that we heartily encourage the Sisters to view the terrain of the way they have been treated by Bishops and the Vatican to see the common ground they share with survivors. The prism of pain can have redemptive value.

Yes, there are individual Sisters who have and continue to stand with the survivors but they are few in number compared to the whole.

The survivors are not kicking the Sisters while they are down. The survivors have been outside of the LCWR meetings for eight years seeking an open door to address this leadership group about the sexual abuse by their members of the communities they represent.

If the Sisters are pressed for time at this meeting, we'd like to be the first to suggest that the time already scheduled on their collective agenda to discuss the Sisters educating the public on human trafficking be re-directed to allow the survivors to speak.

The discussion of this issue should not be an either or for Catholics: either you support the Sisters without question or you don't. The sexual abuse of children entrusted to the care of adults, most especially adults in positions of respect and religious authority, is an issue that cannot be judged as less important, unspoken or put in a wait for the proper time column because the Sisters are under fire.

Indeed, by the very fact that they are under fire comes the possibility of the phoenix moment.

The opportunity for reaching out, comforting the afflicted, caring for the vulnerable, seeking the lost, magnifying the cry for justice, walking with those who suffer, righting wrongs, resurrection, redemption, honesty, and firm purpose of amendment.

The very things many Catholics believed they learned from the Sisters by both word and deed.

[Kristine Ward is chair of the National Survivor Advocates Coalition.]

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