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Nuns struggle with Rome over the future of the church

Pat Perriello | Aug. 10, 2012 NCR Today

David Gibson in his article [1] for Religion News Service lays out the dynamics of the struggle between the nuns and the hierarchy as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious ponders its response to Vatican demands. One bishop even contrasts the struggle with the division between Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles during the earliest days of our church.

It was perhaps inevitable that at some point, there would be a significant challenge to the current hierarchical structure within the church. The bishops themselves have been steadily pushing to exercise greater and greater control, demanding conformity and assent. They have acted as though the sex abuse crisis never happened, that it did no damage to their credibility and that business as usual is very much in order. Either the faithful, including clergy and religious, will fold their tents and simply do as told, or serious conflict will of necessity occur.

One unmistakable conclusion flowing from Vatican II is that all power within the church does not reside in the bishops. They might well try to exercise that power, but it is up to others to challenge them. Those who remember the years following Vatican II know how often we were told that we are the church, the people of God, and that the church does not consist in the hierarchy alone. We will not have power, however, unless we insist upon it. No one gives up power voluntarily, and that is exactly what we are seeing in the recent actions of the bishops and the Vatican.

Our courageous nuns have staked out a vision for their work since the days of Vatican II and have been forceful in preaching true Gospel values through the work they do. We seem to have arrived at a crossroad and an opportunity to stand up for a true partnership with the hierarchy in moving our church forward. Collegiality is a major feature of Vatican II, and the recent autocratic moves by the hierarchy are both unnecessary and unwise.

The nuns deserve our support as they proclaim their understanding of what the Gospel demands. Their statements need to be given credence as an important witness to our faith, just as that of the bishops. A reading of the Acts of the Apostles shows the faithful receive the very same gift of the Holy Spirit as the bishops or apostles and thus have a valid role in working for the future of our church. Fortunately, some bishops are at least silently expressing their support for all the nuns have done for the church over the years. Hopefully, the crisis can and should be resolved through mutual respect and a willingness to work together, but it is time for our hierarchy to put aside the worst of authoritarianism and recall Vatican II's exhortation to collegiality.

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Links:
[1] http://www.religionnews.com/faith/leaders-and-institutions/nuns-gather-to-plan-response-to-vatican-crackdown