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Another letter to a woman religious

Phyllis Zagano | Aug. 15, 2012 Just Catholic

Dear Betty,

I didn't think I'd need to write. By now, you're probably all LCWR-ed out. The hotel was crawling with media those four days. They all missed the real story.

Everybody -- the 900 LCWR members, the folks staffing the 80 exhibits, the 20 or so media folks -- converged in St. Louis on a blistering summer day. The sisters were troupers. Like you, they were mostly 70-somethings with a quiet energy, and they worked very, very hard. (In case the Liturgy Police phone you up, Mass was just as the General Instruction of the Roman Missal would have it -- very "with your Spirit.")

Anyway, on the fourth day in that overcrowded hotel, the one day they could sleep in, they all turned out for the Sisters of Saint Joseph Federation's 7:45 a.m. panel on human trafficking.

I think I was the only one there with media credentials.

That is part of why I shake my head at the whole doctrinal assessment thing. I know I wrote before that some of the LCWR materials are a little, shall we say, "different." But that was then. Things are changing. They have a new executive director now, and most of the professional staff is also new.

And while we're talking about staff, I cannot for the life of me figure out how eight women are supposed to do whatever it is the bishops seem to want when the bishops have 315 working for them over in northwest D.C. (I asked about their budgets: LCWR's is $1.5 million; USCCB's is $39 million.)

So anyway, to me at least, all the back-and-forth about how their catechism can beat up your prayer service is silly. There is so much more to be done.

The back story to mine here is that last year, the Sisters of Saint Joseph Federation met in the same hotel LCWR used this year. They talked about what you would think and took important steps to stamp out trafficking.

You know, trafficking: Promise a girl or boy a better life, ply with drugs and easy money, then prostitute.

Trafficking is real. Once, I heard a story in New York about two girls from China brought to the United States, where they were raped, humiliated and given to Chinatown pimps.

They spoke no English, but they were smart. They learned from television that dialing 911 would reach the police. But they had no idea where they were.

They learned their address from a customer. On a slow afternoon, one gave their keeper some "special treatment" while the other dialed 911 and spoke all the English she knew: "help" and the address. Moments later, a Chinese-speaking New York cop showed up, arrested the pimp and took the girls to a safe house.

That's all I know. Sometimes the girls -- because of drugs or fear or simply because they have nowhere to go -- slip back into the life they did not ask for, did not want. The sisters say up to 17,500 people -- half of them children -- are taken to the US every year.

That 7:45 a.m. panel told the story to a ballroom packed with sisters who daily live the Gospel ministry bishops tend to talk about a lot. The panel included a 30-year-old woman once caught in a web of drugs and prostitution, now free and holding a brand new master of social work degree.

Her name is Katie and, not that it matters much, she is white. She grew up in a middle-class West Coast family, and even went to private Catholic school. When she was 17 or 18, her father died. She moved out to face the world alone.

Katie became a stripper for quick cash to pay her bills and, soon enough, to feed her growing drug habit. One day, her roommate took her to a party with a bunch of guys. It was so easy. She did not know her roommate was paid to supply her to the crowd. Things went from bad to worse.

Katie is one of the lucky ones. She was rescued and now rescues others. The sisters help her.

That, to me, is the real deal. I know the LCWR stuff gets a little edgy sometimes. But when you look at bottom lines, there is much to learn from the sisters, maybe less so from the bishops. For example, the sisters paid $115 per night of their hard-earned money to sleep two in a room. The bishops' latest room cost, most recently in Atlanta, was $179. And they meet twice a year, no doubt traveling at diocesan expense.

It's not only the economics. What's really important about LCWR this year is the whole event took place in the Millennium Hotel that -- thanks to the meeting planners, Nix Associates -- signed the strongest anti-trafficking accord out there. The bishops' planners haven't signed on, and they use a hotel chain that doesn't really take a stand.

I'm kind of at a loss for words. I know when you were working, you used to help folks like Katie all the time. So can you tell me what to say about the church to that 30-year-old very smart woman whose trafficked days left her with a grapefruit-sized tattoo on her right arm and psychic scars too deep to see? Just her. Just Katie. Not the thousands in statistics or the hundreds in the shelters. Just tell me what to say to the real live woman I met in St. Louis that hot day.

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