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LCWR, women religious congregations: same corpus

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 15, 2012 NCR Today

An episcopal technique I have come to notice in recent months involves placing heaps of praise at the feet of our women religious congregations while blasting the Leadership Conference of Women Religious for having led them astray by ?radical feminist? thought.

This ?good sisters,? ?bad LCWR,? back flip deserves some attention.

The bit of dualism first showed up in the April 18th doctrinal assessment out of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, which read in part that the Holy See:

> acknowledges with gratitude the great contribution of women Religious to the Church in the United States as seen particularly in the many schools, hospitals, and institutions of support for the poor ? while recognizing that this doctrinal Assessment concerns a particular conference of major superiors and therefore does not intend to offer judgment on the faith and life of Women Religious in the member Congregations, which belong to that conference.

Since the publication of that statement I?ve noticed those bishops who have spoken out against LCWR are always effusive in their praise for the ?good sisters.? It has been noticeable enough to make one wonder if the phenomenon is a defensive ploy or part of some unstated divide and conquer strategy.

After some further thought I began to think it represents something less sinister, but far more troubling.

But first, just a little background: LCWR is quite clearly an outgrowth and an expression of the sisters? congregations throughout the United States. Each LCWR member, nearly 1500 in all, has been elected from within her congregation to represent its thoughts, interests, aspirations and concerns.

LCWR is as bottom up as the Catholic hierarchy is top down. It is, in fact, a different model of Catholic organization, the most public and democratic model in the U.S. church today. And thanks to the Vatican?s doctrinal assessment, this organization, with its alternative model, is in the spotlight has never before. I might add this model is far more compatible, organizationally speaking, with the American way of life, with our own democratic traditions.

LCWR, then, indeed represents the collective thinking of some 80 percent of the women religious congregations of America. In other words, LCWR represents the minds of women religious as best they can be harnessed and represented by any one religious organization.

If the congregations, through their works of mercy, represent the body of service; LCWR represents the mind of service.

This noted episcopal dualism ? good women, bad leadership ? intentional or not, separates the *way the women act* from *the way they think*, as if this were possible.

It?s another way of saying, ?We like what you do, but we don?t want to hear the way you think.?

?We?ll take your bodies, but not your minds.?

There once was a time, in church history not long ago, when the women of our church, including our women religious, were not afforded the opportunities to go into higher education. This changed in the 20th century. Women went out and got educated. They even began to study theology ? and now we are profiting from the fruits of the first full generation of female Catholic theologians. These women are reflecting on all sorts of things, including injustices outside and within our church.

This represents, of course, a major new development in the course of human history and theology. It?s changing everything.

The female corpus, as men who have lived with or worked with women have come to understand quite clearly, is capable of acts and thoughts. Those who don?t ?get it? soon will or they will be removed from the room. Believe me it will happen.

And for the record, this note is not a lead up to the hot topic of women?s ordination. LCWR?s vision is larger. It involves treating each person, male or female, with equal respect and dignity and valuing each person?s contributions upon an equal and inclusive playing field. It involves finding new ways for lost credibility within our church to be restored. It involves finding ways to reach out to the young by witnessing authentically to the Word.

All this is predicated on taking thoughtful women seriously. It means recognizing LCWR and the U.S. women religious congregations are one in mind and spirit.

If our bishops don?t get this there will be no way to bridge the chasm between the clerical men and religious women, and our church will suffer hugely as a result.

Brothers, this is the 21st century. Enter it. For the sake of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

[Tom Fox is NCR publisher. At the latest LWCR annual convention, he spoke on a panel titled "Religious life in the future: What might it look like? [1]"]

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