

LCWR to Rome: Neither fight nor flight, but engagement

Angie O'Gorman | Aug. 16, 2012

At a time when polarization is valued more than peace, and ideology more than truth, the world needs a new model of disagreement. It has just been given one by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The nuns have chosen not to give themselves or their power over to the coterie of bishops charged with fixing them. Cooperating with misogyny is in no one's best interests. Nor will they simply walk away. Instead, LCWR has chosen to hold themselves in creative tension with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to force a breakthrough in the long-simmering impasse between them. The nuns will engage in dialogue with their accusers as equals, not victims, for as long as possible. If the nuns are forced to compromise the integrity of its mission, they will reconsider. This is not kid stuff and the nuns are not naïve. This is non-violence at its best.

In a press release announcing their "next steps" in responding to the CDF doctrinal assessment and attempted takeover, the nuns asserted that, "religious life, as it is lived by the women religious who comprise LCWR, is an authentic expression of this life that must not be compromised. The theology, ecclesiology, and spirituality of the Second Vatican Council serve as the foundation of this form of religious life which should not be discounted."

Ah, there's the rub. Vatican II is as unpopular with the CDF as is LCWR. In fact, it may be the real culprit.

Like God, crises come right on time. Roman Catholicism is about to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Vatican II, which redefined the church's role in the modern world in terms of relationship rather than rule. "The joys and hopes," said the Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, "the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well." Fifty years ago the bishops asked the women in LCWR's member communities to make this redefinition happen.

It is hard to imagine now the resulting turmoil; the rethinking of vocation, the recasting of identity and of religious life itself. There was bewilderment and hope, fear and faith. Then the nuns hit the streets and Rome retreated to its porticos. Fifty years on, the nuns and the hierarchy have a deeply divergent experience of what it means to be church, and how leadership functions among the people of God. This is a truly critical issue. The outcome will either build up or break down the church of the 21st Century.

But the wider world will be affected as much by the way the conflict itself is handled; by the texture of how truth and experience are argued and faith revealed, by the question of whether, even in a community of believers, conflict must always end in the destruction of an opponent. The world is watching because it is desperate for a different way. And because the nuns are in danger.

The nuns live their mission in the marketplace of human suffering, poverty, racism and violence, among people most negatively affected by economic, political and social sin. But that is not the source of the danger the public sees.

Following publication of the CDF assessment and take-over bid, LCWR's offices were flooded with messages of support, hope and concern for the nuns and the church itself. The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the nuns had been taken up by thousands as their own. Women in a non church-based food pantry in my St. Louis neighborhood are furious at what they see as an ungrateful church abusive of the nuns. They are watching. Wanting updates. How this conflict is handled could help them manage the violence in their own lives.

Since the papacy of John Paul II, there has been a tenet afloat in the church that dialogue serves no purpose. When one is already confirmed in the truth, why speak to others who don't agree? By their own admission, many in the hierarchy think of dialogue as an opportunity to ask clarifying questions of authority in order to better understand the truth. Cardinal William Levada, the recently retired head of the CDF, compared his conversation with LCWR's officers in June to a "dialogue with the deaf." At the end of the time allotted, the nuns still hadn't agreed with him or the doctrinal assessment. Bishop Leonard Blair, one of the bishops assigned to reform LCWR told NPR's Terry Gross that the nuns are in denial of the problems raised by the doctrinal assessment. And besides, he says, he doesn't negotiate essentials.

LCWR, on the other hand, has fostered an approach to conflict that assumes all sides hold a piece of the solution because they hold a part of the truth. Dialogue is pervasive in their approach to conflict resolution. Everyone is at the table. No one gets destroyed.

How will these two views talk to each other? Will the strategy of holding them in tension break through to something new, a more whole, creative and inclusive church, or implode like an overweighted dam?

And how will the nuns live in the stress of this tension over time? We know from their choices since the doctrinal assessment was issued that they will not be reactive. The nuns and no one else decide their responses. There will not be denouncements of others, no hate speech or demonizing or inference or escalating emotional violence. Instead, according to outgoing president, Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, contemplation will sustain and prepare them to speak to the ecclesial powers, "from a stance of deep prayer that values mutual respect, careful listening and open dialogue."

"In situations of impasse," said Farrell in her presidential address to the assembly, "it is only prayerful spaciousness that allows what wants to emerge to manifest itself? Our collective wisdom needs to be gathered. It germinates in silence..."

Silence instead of hate radio? This is indeed a different model.

LCWR gathered in St. Louis with no preordained answer for the Vatican. From regional input, the wisdom of the gathered nuns, messages from around the world, the spaciousness of contemplation and the spirit of God, they chose to engage their accusers in conversation. How completely simple. How uncommonly difficult. They are a sacrament of a still strong belief that disagreement does not have to destroy; a gift to the church and the world on the 50th anniversary of Vatican II.

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