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They do it to themselves

Phyllis Zagano | Aug. 29, 2012 Just Catholic

I've learned recently that San Francisco's archbishop-in-waiting was arrested for drunken driving, a Hartford pastor assisted at a gay wedding in New York, and, according to a priest-preacher on Long Island, Augustine is the father of Western monasticism.

Good thing the Vatican is watching the nuns.

Yes, clerics can be overworked, at least those who work at pastoring and preaching. Yes, a lot of them are not straight-arrow in line with all of Rome's teachings. Yes, some skipped a few classes in seminary. But things that slid under the rug before the international electronic network buzzed into affordability are now headlines somewhere, or about to become so.

The problem is even though the whole world watches or seems to watch every Catholic blip and burp, little happens, little is done about it. The management is on vacation or out to lunch, and the bumbling bumbles on.

So, when Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, 56, left a late-night dinner and got stopped -- and booked -- for DUI, some defend him as an alcoholic, while most ignore it altogether. Excuse me, he had his mother in the car. Does the term "elder abuse" ring any bells in Rome?

And when Fr. Michael DeVito, 62, shows up in a collar to do a reading at his gay cousin's wedding on the 92-foot charter yacht Lexington the East River, the archbishop of Hartford puts a letter of rebuke in his permanent record. Hello? It was in *The New York Times*' wedding announcements.

And if the young-ish African preacher doesn't know his Benedict from his Augustine at 7:30 in the morning, it doesn't matter because the Mass was "covered" while the pastor was away, and the parishioners -- at least most of them -- either don't know the difference or could not understand his diction anyway.

So, as I said, it's a good thing Rome is watching the nuns.

It's a good thing because they've been out and about, running all over the country complaining about the government's economics -- even late at night -- and we certainly can't have that.

It's a good thing because some of them are "soft" on some Catholic teachings. My goodness, one of them is a Yale professor who wrote a book about ethical sexual relationships -- married or not.

It's a good thing because most of them haven't stayed home memorizing Augustine's biography, and instead are feeding the poor and helping the disadvantaged.

So do you think Rome will learn something from all its nun-watching? Independent of that, do you think Rome will ever get the social impact of the mass media?

There are several issues here.

First is personnel. So long as only the ordained are running dioceses and parishes and preaching and there are not enough priests to go around, these things will happen. Rome will not remove Cordileone, Hartford will keep DeVito, and the Long Island parish will continue to suffer the mangled misrememberings of a substitute priest.

Second is media. Where once anything about the church came only through controlled media -- from the pulpit or the diocesan newspaper -- now anything goes, and it goes worldwide in seconds.

So Rome is stuck between a rock and an old cathode ray tube. Which is exactly the problem. It needs to upgrade both its equipment and its understanding of media.

Rome seems to know that the women of the church are better connected and provide better sound bites. Sometimes I think the investigations of US sisters and of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious were started by a memo entitled "Sister Got an iPad." As it happens, the women of the church are light-years ahead of the clerics in pressing issues they've followed in the same media they now use. We're talking human trafficking; desperate poverty; crushing medical conundrums; heartbreaking family stories; the ravages of war, of earthquakes, of hurricanes all the way down the line.

The sisters' views are ratified and spread electronically because they are "good takes." They are soft-spoken, mostly nonjudgmental, articulate and committed. Compared with the clerics, they are way ahead of the game. And while vestments and pulpits make official whatever the archbishop, the pastor or the visiting priest may say or do, the media's cold eye warms more readily to the Nuns on the Bus, the academic writings of sisters, and 900 women at a meeting in sweltering St. Louis.

The women's unofficial explanations of the Gospel go a lot farther than the men's, even when some women would be happy to join the ranks of officialdom. Wouldn't it be fun to have the church ratify women's voices? They've already got the media.

Which all circles back to the personnel problem. Church law won't have women preaching, pastoring or heading dioceses. That's because church law won't allow women to be ordained.

But, as a matter of fact, women can run parishes, and if Rome returns to its tradition of women deacons, women could be preaching in the pulpit. As for running dioceses, there are a few too many legal knots to untie. But two out of three's not bad.

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