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When it's about women, you've gone too far

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

Editor's Note: A few days after this column was posted, Trocaire and the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland worked out a compromise. The broadcasting commission agreed that if Trocaire removed the words "Lenten Campaign" from the advertisements, they could run on commercial television.

Try to remember this: It is possible to go too far. Remember this, too: It will all depend on what you're talking about whether it turns out to be too far or not.

I got another lesson on that one recently. Last week, in Ireland, Trocaire, the official overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland, began its regular Lenten ad campaign.

The interesting thing about the campaign -- which is not uncommon to most churches in Lent -- is that it is about more than "charity." It does not ask for alms alone. It asks people to contribute to movements that seek justice. It puts its resources to the service of social consciousness and social change. It always calls for change in the system that is creating the oppression, contributing to the poverty, or justifying the discrimination.

So, in previous Lenten campaigns, for example, it called attention to apartheid in South Africa and

channeled money to organizations there who were working to develop a democracy in that country. The Irish government and the church supported that campaign.

Then, in another year, Trocáire concentrated on the liberation of child soldiers and Ireland supported them in that campaign, too.

Finally, Trocáire turned the light and the money on the plight of slave laborers around the world and were applauded for their efforts there, too.

In all their Lenten drives Trocáire uses public information spots on Irish television. It mounts a poster campaign across the country. It publishes public information brochures throughout the republic to focus attention on issues that are at the base of oppression or poverty and collects money to be used to change the system as well as to alleviate the effects of the oppression.

All of these campaigns have revolved around clearly political issues. And all of them have gotten widespread support.

Advertisement

Till this one.

This one features an unending grid of diapered babies, black and white, all infants, all charming and bright-eyed and lively. Finally the voice-over says, "These children will have less education, live in more poverty, contract more disease, suffer more violence, face more disadvantage than if they had malaria or HIV. They will never even be given a chance. Why? Because they're female."

Bingo!

This ad, on gender equality, the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) has decreed, must be removed from its commercial airwaves because it is "political."

Oh, give us a break.

Racism isn't political. Child soldiers aren't political. Slave labor and human trafficking aren't political. But

gender equality is?

The ad is "political" and contrary to the Radio and Television Act of 1988, BCI argues, because it "calls upon the Government to produce a National Action Plan and seeks public signatures for a petition in this regard."

Protests about the ban are coming from everywhere, true. RTE -- Radio Television Erin -- refuses to comply, for instance. They will show the ads, but they will confine the ads to noncommercial television and public radio channels only. The kind that don't have sponsors, apparently. The implication seems to be that sponsors would -- at least could -- withdraw their own advertising support from programs that are 'political,' meaning in support of gender equality.

The campaign itself has also not been withdrawn. And in columns and Letters to the Editor everywhere, the Irish are raising some very pointed questions.

They are asking things like why Trocaire doesn't focus on the Catholic church itself, its sponsoring institution, as a justifying agent of female discrimination. (*Irish Times*, Saturday, March 10, 2007, Patsy McGarry, "Trocaire's young girl without a chance lives far closer to home," p. 13.)

They want to know how it is that a government commission can dare to question the need for this ad in a world where two-thirds of the poor are women.

They are pointing out that 66 percent of the illiterate of the world are women who are being denied the right to an education.

They are not unaware that 70 percent of the refugees and internally displaced population of the world in war-torn countries are women.

They know that women, even in Ireland and in developed countries in general, are still earning only 69 percent of male wages for the same level of work.

A people in an agricultural country who have known desperate starvation themselves, realize in a way most don't in our part of the world, that women produce 80 percent of the planet's food but get less than 10 percent of the world's agricultural assistance and aid, even from nations like the United States. (*Irish Times*, Thursday, March 8, 2007, Mary Raftery, Trocáire ad deserves an airing, p. 16.)

And, finally, they are acutely conscious of the fact that women who are the backbone of the church everywhere, including in Ireland, are barred from the theological formulations of the church. They know that, however much women serve the church, they are nevertheless left out, even of its restored diaconate -- "not even given a chance" -- simply because they are female. Best of all, the questions are getting more numerous, more pointed, more revealing every day.

Why the problem with only this campaign and not with any of the others? Is it because this campaign is so much closer to home for all of us than malaria and child soldiers and apartheid will ever be?

Is it because down deep they -- and maybe even we -- know that this is discrimination in our own society that is hiding in plain sight?

Is it because a change in this social issue would turn both society and church upside down? Or maybe, more to the point, would a change finally turn society and church right side up?

From where I stand, the objection to the ad is far more to be contested than the subject matter of the ad itself. Gender discrimination enslaves or suppresses the development of half the population of the world. The very idea that the attempt to focus on the issue of gender equality can be gagged, can be denied public consciousness, on the grounds that it is a "political problem" -- for whatever reason -- is itself the real problem. The very idea that we cannot discuss the questions of women in church and society without facing either theological or social recrimination is the issue behind the issues.

And we have the nerve to question the treatment of women in other cultures of the world? Now that's going too far.

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