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Editorial: Vatican, LCWR approaching critical crossroads

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Editorial

?A church that does not go out of itself, sooner or later, sickens from the stale air of closed rooms,? Pope Francis has written in a letter released Thursday to his fellow Argentine bishops. This is a similar message to the one he delivered to his fellow cardinals before the conclave, impressing them enough to elect him bishop of Rome

In his new note he went on to say in the process of ?going out? the church always risks running into ?accidents,? adding [1], ?I prefer a thousand times over a church of accidents than a sick church.?

A church of accidents ? a church willing to take risks on the edges ? a church dedicated to service of the most needy ? a church working on behalf of mercy, peace and justice?

This sounds a lot like the church U.S. Catholic sisters have been building in recent decades. Not only U.S. women religious, but also women religious around the world have been at this work. It is the women who have lived closest to the marginalized; it is the women who have worked on the ?peripheries;? it is the women who have gone precisely where Francis is encouraging others to go.

And what has been their reward?

Have they been lifted up by others?

Have they been acclaimed by their church leadership?

No. Despite occasional laudatory words to the contrary, these faith-filled women have been too often demeaned and too often tarnished with accusations of alleged infidelity. The most ironic element in this sad story has been that these accusations have arisen out of the ranks of the very men who have inflicted great damage to the church by repeated patterns of sex abuse cover-up.

Christians have learned to expect persecution. Being voices for the poor, the marginalized, gays and lesbians, the uninsured or pregnant young mothers are rare undertakings. But the women religious have toiled endlessly to assist and represent these largely voiceless people.

While persecution comes with the territory of living and working in the ?accidental? church, we don?t expect such attacks to come from our own clergy. Yet, too often they have.

Hiding behind highly exaggerated accusations of infidelity, certain bishops have revealed stunning ignorance. In the process they have abused their authority. It?s been the easier course.

The takeover [2] of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) by the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the result of an extended ?doctrinal assessment,? knowledgeable Catholics understand has much less to do with core beliefs than with episcopal obedience.

Our women religious are among those who understand this firsthand. We have all come to see too many of our prelates feel uncomfortable around women. The result is they stay away from them. This results, over time, in more fear and almost certain misunderstandings. Only open, sustained discussions -- on equal footing -- can set a new course toward church health.

We need conversations in which Catholic women and men -- religious, clergy and laity -- can talk freely in a spirit of mutual support about their faith and church lives.

It would be a healing experience and needs to take place in dioceses across the country. This would be a step.

Our women are the most theologically educated in the history of the church. The differences between their thinking and our bishops? thinking has less to do with faith and doctrine than church structure and the applications of church teachings and mission. There is plenty of core common ground.

The first step, however, is to recognize that women carry vital insights necessary to restoring health to the ?sick? church of which Francis speaks. Without women participating as equals in engaged discussions there is little hope such health can be found.

Even more fundamentally, then, the Vatican/LCWR issue is really about whether the current male clerical decision-making system can sustain church life in the 21st century. Huge numbers have concluded it cannot.

The Vatican?s current path, which excludes women religious from any semblance of self-determination, ostensibly in a spirit of mutual episcopal cooperation, threatens the continued life of the church. Moreover, it is an assault on all women. In turn, it is an assault on all Catholics.

This highly visible rift between the Vatican and Catholic sisters begs a question: Can our church sustain theologically literate women in its ranks? More widely, can it attract dedicated women of any stripe? We are losing these women faster than one can imagine. Ask almost any parent of a grown daughter.

The Vatican congregation?s doctrinal assessment of LCWR, apparently for now upheld [3] by Francis, is, then, a blow to all who want to restore community and health to the church.

If the Vatican insists on carrying out its LCWR takeover, the group will have no choice but to end its canonical relationship with the institutional church. This is because the entire LCWR body almost unanimously voted [4] last August to continue a dialogue with the bishops as long as the effort does not compromise LCWR integrity.

At issue, in the final analysis, is not obedience. It is rather the dignity of every person and the rights of every person in the church, stemming from his or her baptism.

We are coming perilously close to a point of rupture. Some, of course, would relish such a break. However, their satisfaction would be short lived. For such a break would send out a loud signal, one that would echo through history, that the most significant U.S. women religious body had concluded fidelity to conscience and fidelity to the values of the Gospels required separation. It would be a stunning blow to all Catholics.

LCWR, canonically or not, in reality or in spirit, will continue to serve our communities of women religious and, through them, the neediest of human beings.

Our women religious will remain Catholic to the core despite efforts by some to paint them otherwise. Indeed, they will have concluded church dedication to mission *required* separation.

Charges and counter-charges will ensue. But an honest evaluation would find that the women took action only following the deepest of soul searching in a spirit of community, dedication and love.

It would also find the final straw was not doctrinal. Instead, it was finally about faithfulness to the very Gospel ideals which Francis preaches each day.

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