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Summer reading for an aging church

Phyllis Zagano | Jul. 17, 2013 Just Catholic

The religion teacher's comment is more lament than joke: Students think Vatican II is the pope's summer house.

Like it or not, the church of the Second Vatican Council is aging out -- the 85-year-old pope was replaced by a 76-year-old pope -- and the next generations don't know or don't care about the rules and regulations.

So what do they care what Joan Chittister, Donald Cozzens, Louis DeThomasis, Anne E. Patrick or Sandra Schneiders have to say? Each has a new book out. Each addresses questions both timeless and contemporary. Each is over 70.

The task isn't a "new evangelization." It's evangelization, period. But for the summer afternoons of the Vatican II crowd in the mountains or by the pool, there are some good reads out there to displace thoughts of Medicare.

Chittister seems the most approachable for churched and unchurched alike. She gives commentaries on life in the world, not insider trading tips about the church of the future. Her *For Everything a Season [1]* is a redo of her 1995 gloss on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 [2]. Her elegant meditations move along, verse by verse: a time to be born, a time to lose, a time to love, until a time for every purpose under heaven. I wonder, however, how well the under-21 crowd would do with her references: Thomas Carlyle, Zen masters, Karl Menninger, William Jennings Bryan, Henry David Thoreau and the like.

Such is the problem of education, a problem De La Salle Christian Br. DeThomasis addresses in *Dynamics of Catholic Education [3]*. He says what most Catholic educators think: Catholic higher education is not catechism class, and the Catholic school is not the Catholic church. But in order to maintain their missions, Catholic schools need to risk, invent and imagine. It is imagination that lets the Catholic school be school, even as it cherishes its Catholic identity.

And imagination will change the church from the inside. At least that is what Cleveland priest Cozzens writes in his lovely *Notes from the Underground: The Spiritual Journal of a Secular Priest [4]*. Cozzens' honest inside view will strike the hearts of any who have followed church affairs since the opening of Vatican II, admittedly the over-70 (or nearly so) folks among us. What does Cozzens ask us to imagine? Try a pontifical Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, where half the servers are female and the deacon proclaiming the Gospel is a woman. Yes, imagine that.

But don't imagine women religious out of the picture. The recent Seattle meeting of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests passed a resolution about ordaining women as deacons, suggesting that women religious would be first in line. That's not necessarily true. Reading Patrick's *Conscience and Calling: Ethical Reflections on Catholic Women's Church Vocations [5]*, you might wonder why any woman would get involved in the church in any way. Patrick shares some striking horror stories of women religious' plain awful treatment by the pastors who promised the moon yet proved to be tyrants.

Would getting involved in the "system" as ordained clerics help? Patrick gives a nod to the notion, but in the

final work of her trilogy on religious life, Sandra Schneiders mentions ordination just once, and not particularly kindly. Her view, shared by many, is that the ontological distinction between the ordained and nonordained "continues to resist any coherent theological explanation" even as it exists to create divisions between the people and deacons and priests and bishops. Schneiders cites a commentary of Canon 574, and it encapsulates her discussion: "Consecrated life reflects the prophetic nature of the Church and enjoys a certain freedom and autonomy." The book is titled *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World* *[6]*.

Which brings us back to Chittister and so many others who have been out there *doing*: helping the poor and the ill and the downright sad and lonely people of the planet who have nowhere to turn and who, in too many instances, fear the official church of rules and regulations and, if truth be told, of fees. As I have indicated before, throw a dart at the attendance list of any Leadership Conference of Women Religious meeting and chances are it will land on the name of someone competent to run General Motors,

Of course, we're not so sure the Vatican has the same view, and who knows what shoe will drop next? Even so, as Pope Francis' election smoke clears, these commentaries -- on life, on education, on church, on women and especially on religious life -- will prove themselves in their own ways.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. She will speak Sept. 20-21 at Wisdom House in Litchfield, Conn.; Oct. 13 at Thomas More Chapel of Yale University; and Oct. 23 at Boston College. Her recent books include *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, Paulist Press).]

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