

The Power of the Muzzle

Ken Briggs | Aug. 16, 2013 NCR Today

The otherwise noble Leadership Conference of Women Religious has done itself a disservice by agreeing to be muzzled. The Vatican demanded it as part of the visit to their annual assembly by Archbishop Sartain in his recently appointed role as their disciplinarian. Going along with it continued the sisters' pattern of believing that secrecy is the means of realizing their goals and assuring Rome's best behavior. It's typical of their good intentions but devoid of reasonable expectations. Though there are times when secrecy is justified, it's mostly a tactic by the powerful to maintain control of events and agenda. This looks exactly like that.

The usual line is that conflicts are much better dealt with behind closed doors. That usually means that those in power pose a threat to the plaintiffs if the silence is broken, while devising means of leaking their side of the story to the press. Our patriot ancestors found this to be cause for Revolution. The Constitution trumpeted openness as the key to a healthy democracy.

No, the church isn't a democracy, but human interactions on most any level benefit from the light of day.

Many sisters are no doubt caught in two church cultures at this point. Under the old order, acceding to the will of ordained male superiors was a given. Near absolute compliance was the order of the day. Vatican II scrambled that culture by encouraging sisters to take more initiative themselves, only to be widely opposed when they actually tried to do it. That left a good many sisters still caught between two cultures, the deeply ingrained instinct toward obedience tempered by relative autonomy. The experience has surely been wrenching and that calls for compassion.

But remaining too agreeable poses dangers such as that faced by the LCWR as it gives up its voice. Surrendering that is to lose the possibility of the prophetic word that has so often saved the church from itself.

The forfeiting of comment began at the outset of the general investigations of sisters. The accusations were defined by Rome and the sisters were told to keep quiet. They have. The rationale for the muzzle sounds a great deal more like the thinking of oppressors than it does for an institution that preaches that the truth shall make us free. Meanwhile, the LCWR at this stage shows signs of further demoralization, but we may not know how accurate that is so long as they keep to themselves their formidable ability to put things into perspective.

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