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LCWR: A radical obedience to the voice of God in our time

Jamie Manson | Apr. 23, 2012 Grace on the Margins

In his Holy Thursday sermon, Pope Benedict XVI made headlines for criticizing [1] those who refuse to obey the church's position on the ordination of celibate men. He traced his argument back to Christ's obedience to the will of God.

"His concern was for true obedience," Benedict said, "as opposed to human caprice."

Of course, the pontiff fails to point out that Jesus was obeying God while also radically disobeying the religious leaders and laws of his time. Like so many archconservative Roman Catholics, he is confusing God with the institutional church and its doctrine.

I suppose the pope is using some of this same logic in his treatment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. He views the sisters' unwillingness to condemn gays and lesbians or contraception or women who feel called ordained ministry as an act of "caprice."

But the basis on which the sisters focus their ministries is anything but shallow and whimsical. Their devotion is founded on a radical obedience to the voice of God as it emerges from the voices of the poor, the sick, the abandoned and the broken.

Most sisters spend their lives immersed in the deepest sufferings of our world. They don't just stop by the soup kitchen on Ash Wednesday for a photo op. Some actually live in shelters with homeless women, orphans or the addicted.

Their unwillingness to condemn gays and lesbians probably stems from the work they did with AIDS patients in the early 1980s. Back then, the disease affected mostly gay men, and no one was sure how it was contracted. Women religious were among one of the few groups who were unafraid to touch those dying from this unknown, frightening disease.

Is there any doubt that, as the sisters bathed and fed these deteriorating bodies, they also noticed the deep and authentic love that these men shared with partners and friends? The sisters also saw anguish suffered by men whose parents would not visit them and the sacramental power of those who reconciled with family before they died.

Any disagreements on contraception likely stem from the sisters' work with poor, homeless and battered women. They harbor girls enslaved in the sex trade, women trapped in abusive relationships and mothers abandoned to poverty.

Many sisters still run hospitals and are medical professionals. They have seen firsthand the price that so many women pay for husbands and boyfriends who refuse to wear condoms yet still demand sex. Every day, they see patients who have been date raped or women who bear life-threatening pregnancies.

Many sisters are theologians, ethicists, spiritual directors and teachers. They engage students and directees in their metaphysical and existential questions. They spend hours listening to stories and struggles and aid in discerning ethical dilemmas and spiritual crises. And though technically they cannot confer absolution, they have heard countless confessions.

Some women religious do support the ordination of women. They have dedicated their entire lives to being a sacrament in the world, yet they have been told that their bodies are not worthy of consecrating the Eucharist or giving last rites to an ailing patient whom they have shepherded through sickness unto death.

With such an intensely sacramental life, it should be no wonder that sisters have deep intellectual curiosity and spiritual longings. With hearts so regularly broken open, why wouldn't they ask deeper questions of this mysterious world that brims with the power of a wounded God? With all that they've witnessed, how could they not entertain the possibility that holiness can be present in same-sex love or in the body of a woman priest?

Their ideas, interests and programs are not the product of an obstinate disobedience of power. Rather, their commitments come from a deep obedience to the God who appears in the faces of the powerless and the vulnerable. They see the crucified Christ in places most clergy and laypeople dare not go. They are not wayward, but wise enough not to place limits on how and where God works God's grace.

The sisters' experiences tell them that hiding behind the false fortress of religious laws simply does not do justice to a God who reaches out to us in ways that far exceed even the most active Catholic imagination. The sisters have learned well Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees who "disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." They are obeying their calling to be, what Sandra Schneiders recently called, a "prophetic life form."

But the Vatican is telling these women, as it has told many groundbreaking theologians, ministers and saints before, that a prophet is not welcome in her own native place. They are commanding the sisters to shut down their minds and hearts even at the price of shutting out the very voice of God.

Sure, the Vatican is thanking the sisters for their hard work and devotion on behalf of the church. But they are also telling them that they have become too empowered and that they must now be carefully watched and tightly controlled. They must halt the practice of asking theological questions, they must stop reading the signs of the times and they must cease exploring the ways in which God's presence is unfolding in our present reality. Essentially, the hierarchy is reducing them to the equivalent of spiritual enslavement.

This latest development in the U.S. church poses a challenge not only for sisters, but for all Catholics who believe that the Catholic tradition is much richer and deeper than absolute subservience to manmade doctrines on issues related to the pelvic zone.

It is a moment that demands we read the writing on the wall: There is no safe place within the institutional church for intellectually based, pastorally grounded interpretation of or questioning of doctrine. There is no space in this institution for prophets to dwell.

With each new crackdown on a priest, nun or layperson of integrity, the institutional church seems to be begging a schism. Their goal is either to coerce or force out anyone who won't toe the line on marriage equality, contraception and women's ordination. Without absolute conformity on these issues, the bishops cannot make their far more profitable alliances with right-wing religious and political groups.

As *NCR* reported last week [2], if the sisters do not comply, they will likely "face ouster as a Vatican-recognized representative of sisters in the United States." If the LCWR isn't the representative of sisters in the

United States, wouldn't that position necessarily fall on the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) [3], a highly orthodox group representing less than 20 percent of sisters in United States? This would surely help the Vatican in fulfilling its vision of a leaner, meaner Roman Catholic Church.

This attack on the sisters is an attack on everyone who believes in their ministries and who has benefited from their ministries. There has never been a more crucial moment for us to stand in solidarity. It is time particularly for men religious in this country to take a courageous stand. They, too, must use their privilege to speak out and risk their own well-being for the good of their sisters.

The very *life* of the prophetic life form is in peril. If the sisters are ejected from the church, we must create church around them. If they are evicted from their properties, those with the means must take them in. The sisters, who have dedicated their lives to ensuring that no one is abandoned, cannot be abandoned.

Because to abandon them would be to abandon one of the last vestiges of the spirit of God at work in the church.

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