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A letter to a woman religious

Phyllis Zagano | May. 9, 2012 Just Catholic

Dear Betty,

The whole thing is a heartbreak. I can picture the tears you've shed, for your community, for your vocation, for your very life. Please believe me, nothing was wasted.

The noise coming from Rome about American women religious is in large part just that: the blustering of old men, translated into official-looking documents by cassock-clad junior clerics who wistfully wander the Curia's halls dreaming of a more orderly church, where lace is white and lay folk are quiet.

It might sound like an indictment of you, but the world heard it as an indictment of them.

They want a tidy, controlled church.

That's not likely to happen.

Even as today's pope curries the favor of the Lefevbrites -- you know, the ultraconservative Society of St. Pius X, with the Holocaust-denying bishop -- I think most of the 1.2 billion Catholics see the church differently. I think they see the church as communal and collegial, not collaborative and political. That is the big difference, you know. What scholars call "communion ecclesiology" looks at the church the way you do, just that, as a communion. What they call "juridical ecclesiology" is creeping more and more to the fore, and creating the sort of top-down situation the Leadership Conference of Women Religious is in right now.

It wasn't always like this. Some scholars say the initial claim to papal primacy came in the late second century. That's actually a good thing -- a place and people to coordinate belief and practice. Over the centuries things evolved, until now Rome is -- or at least we perceive it as -- the absolute center of all power and authority. That makes bishops regional vice presidents, ever searching for the next rung up the ladder ... to what?

That's the change I've noticed over the years since the Second Vatican Council closed its doors and the windows blew wide open. I barely remember the council, and certainly was not aware of it at the time. That could help explain the nostalgic others behind me wishing for a dreamy past church. They've seen the old sepia and Kodachrome photos -- the boys and girls lined up by Sister in her huge habit, Father with that little hat, the bishop in ermine with jewel-encrusted gloves.

You're 74, the average age, they tell me, of all the women religious in the United States. You were there, in that photo. I guess from your perspective, the changes were very big. You rode them well. Now you're in the middle of it all, with few sisters behind you and many more already gone to God. I saw on CBS the other day a segment saying that even your own name, Betty, is out of fashion -- and the Midwest's "Betty Clubs" are dying out.

I know it hurts. I've said this to you before, probably 25 years ago. The drop in vocations to women's institutes is not because young women don't trust you. It is because they don't trust the men. It is a new world, as you well

know, and very few women are willing to be treated the way the men -- I guess by that, I mean Rome -- treat LCWR and, by extension, you.

I did read the document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith you sent around. Did you notice it is not numbered, and it is not signed? It is on the congregation's letterhead, but on behalf of whom? And on behalf of what? Whoever wrote it seems to think of himself (and you can be sure it is "himself") as defender of the One True Faith, minion of the pope and a future cardinal. Because I've read the LCWR materials as well, I see the congregation's errors, both of fact and reasoning. The Vatican's paper is in large respect a sly attempt to sully the names of all of you. (Did I tell you already about the sister who came up to me at church the other day? She said, "Why don't they just burn all 57,000 of us at the stake and be done with it?")

Oh, I know there are things that came from LCWR that were a little, shall we say, "different." I share with you concern about the coming assembly. I read somewhere the archbishop named to reform LCWR is not stopping the speakers. I do wonder about Barbara Marx Hubbard. They call her a "futurist"? I also wonder if the archbishop is letting it go forward as a trap. But you don't have to go to it, and your provincial will go or not go as she can.

There is nothing anyone can do right now about it all. But there are still the poor, the imprisoned, the hungry. I think your work -- even though it's volunteer -- down at the soup kitchen is what it is all about. And I hope your arthritis is doing better.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. Her most recent books are *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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