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In defense of our women religious

Thomas C. Fox | Jul. 19, 2012 NCR Today

Catholic theologian Regina Schulte is one of the reasons our church is in trouble today. Years ago she went off and got educated. For a while she served the church as a Catholic sister. Eventually she left the religious life and married. For years she and her late husband, Jim, earned their livings as Catholic theologians. Jim died eleven years ago. Regina continues reflecting on life, church, and the human condition while living in partial retirement.

Regina is an historic figure. She was part of the first major wave of Catholic women to earn degrees in theology, one of a group of women who, for the first time in history, began to bring a distinctly feminist view of theology to the Catholic table. When we look back at this phase of Catholic history I?ll bet it will have been the educated women of our church who will be credited for changing its course. And it is changing. If not from the top down, then from the bottom up.

Today, Schulte?s essays and book reviews appear mostly in Corpus Reports [1].

Recently she wrote an essay in defense of our Catholic sisters who, as we know are also educated in theology and many other disciplines. They are the proverbial horses who have left the barn and won?t be returning there easily any time soon.

What follows are some of Regina?s musings.

Vatican Officials vs. Leadership Conference of Women Religious

In an Easter Monday message this year, Pope Benedict XVI expressed an appeal for women to have a more visible role within the Church. In two earlier instances, the Pope also spoke of the need to expand roles of women. ?Women?s spiritual power will know how to make their own space. And we will have to try and listen,? he said on one occasion. On the other: ?[Women], and we with them, must look for their right place, so to speak?.I believe that women themselves, with their superiority?will know how to make their own space. We?ll try not to stand in their way.?

Condescending though they be, these remarks seemed to have handed a blank check to women. But, in the case of U.S. women?s religious congregations, the Vatican is now placing a ?hold? on that check. Not only has their ?space? been closed, but bishops (as in ?men?) have been given control of what nuns have created in that space. The Vatican?s actions speak louder than their words (as in ?false prophecy?)

It isn?t that nuns were awaiting permission to pursue their modern apostolates; the above-quoted words of Benedict merely endorse what they have been doing in their own inspired way since Vatican Council II.

But, perhaps they became too successful ?in their space.? After the Council, they returned to and imbibed the

spirit of their founders, then adapted it for ministry in the contemporary world. They took their cues from the Gospels and the Council teachings in directing their ?superiority? (B-XVI) and ?genius? (JP-II) to the needs of ?the neighbor.?

By comparison, this reflects badly on the hierarchy, fixated on retrieving their own image and power by dragging the Church backward in time. They fuss about obedience, dogma, retro-liturgical maneuvers, the charade about religious freedom, women?s reproductive behaviors, and who marries whom. American nuns find such issues to be counterproductive to the works of the Gospel, at worst; and mere distractions at best. Hence, they refrain from pursuing them. There is so much to do in helping ?the neighbor? survive in human dignity that nuns have no time for what is surely not on the Holy Spirit?s agenda. And, therein lies the danger! Today these issues are foremost on the hierarchical agenda.

As an unsolicited and pro bono volunteer counsel for nuns? defense against the recent hierarchical indictment of them for doctrinal disloyalty (although I am convinced that the defendants need no outside help), I enter the following exhibits on behalf of the defendants.

Exhibit A, entered by the defense: The Gospels.

I submit as testimony the following sampling of Gospel texts reflecting the paradigm that these women look to in their faithful apostleship. The Gospels are rife with pertinent passages; these are taken from Matthew alone. (Note: All gospel quotes are from ?The New American Bible, 1970.)

1) ?They carried to him all those afflicted with various diseases and racked with pain: the possessed, the lunatics, the paralyzed. He cured them all.? (4:24)

2) ?Your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father? (5:16, emphasis added)

3)?A sound tree cannot bear bad fruit any more than a decayed tree can bear good fruit.? (5:16, emphasis added)

4) ?He who welcomes you welcomes me, and he who welcomes me welcomes him who sent me.? (10:40)

5) ?The people who were fed numbered four thousand, apart from women and children.? (15:38)

6) ?Whoever welcomes one such child for my sake welcomes me.? (18:5)

7) ?If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor?. Afterward come back and follow me.? (19:21)

8) ?Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we welcome you away from home or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we visit you when you were ill or in prison???.?I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.? (25:35-46)

9) And, this from Luke?s gospel: ? ?Which of these three [i.e., the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan], in your opinion, was neighbor to the man who fell in with robbers?? The answer came, ?The one who treated him with compassion.? Jesus said to him, ?Then go and do the same?.? (10:25-37)

Argument: The history of the Church in the United States is witness to the faithful ministry of Religious Women in following such teachings of Jesus.

Exhibit B, entered by the defense: Teaching from Vatican Council II

The Documents of Vatican Council II form a very large compendium of pastoral teaching and reflections on life in the Church. The following are but samples.

1) ?Since the fundamental norm of the religious life is a following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel, such is to be regarded by all communities as their supreme law.? (Document on Religious Life, #2, emphasis added.)

2) ?Communities should promote among their members a suitable awareness of contemporary human conditions and the needs of the Church. For if their members can combine the burning zeal of an apostle with wise judgments, made in the light of faith, concerning the circumstances of the modern world, they will be able to come to the aid of men (sic) more effectively.? (Ibid., #2, d, emphasis added)

3) ?In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of absolutely every person and of actively helping when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord: ?As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me.? (Church in the Modern World, #27, emphasis added)

Exhibit C entered by the defense: Statements from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Again, as with the gospels, and the documents of Vatican Council II, counsel for the defense merely drew straws to decide which texts to pull from the abundance that can be cited.

1) ?The characteristic of the lay state being a life led in the midst of the world and of secular affairs, lay people are called by God, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world.? (#940) Note: members of women?s religious congregations, by reason of not being clergy, are included in the laity.

2) ?The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy?.The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead.? (#2447, emphasis in the original)

3) ?Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person.? (#1738, emphasis in the original)

Argument: The Catechism is the product of intense labor by many experts over a period of time. It was endorsed by Pope John Paul II as a compendium of authentic Church beliefs and practices. An introductory letter detailing the work that went into it and authorization of its use is signed by him.

Exhibit #D entered by the defense: Papal statements quoted in opening paragraph, above.

Argument: It seems very disingenuous for Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor, John Paul II, to ?appeal? for a greater participation of women in the formal leadership and missions of the Church. It is in the Pope?s power to accord equality to women, and he can bring it about whenever he chooses to do so.

Argument: It is reasonable to think that this accusation of doctrinal unfaithfulness would not have been directed to the LCWR if women provided balance in the Vatican tribunals and bureaucracies. Women, with their ?superiority? and ?genius? would surely help the males prioritize issues according to appropriate judgment concerning their importance for the common good and the mission of the Church.

Exhibit #5E entered by the defense: Warnings and indictments addressed by Jesus to those in power.

1) ?If you want to avoid judgment, stop passing judgment. Your verdict on others
will be the verdict passed on you?.Why look at the speck in your brother?s eye
when you miss the plank in your own?? (Matthew, 7:2-3, emphasis added)

2) ?Blind guides! You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel!? (Ibid, 23:24)

Argument: Jesus detested hypocrisy. In the light of recent public exposure of deplorable behavior and practices by the hierarchy, for which they have yet to assume public responsibility, I submit that these words of Jesus should be entered into the court documents as reflecting on a lack of integrity in the prosecution.

The Defense Rests

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[1] http://www.corpus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=category.display&Category_ID=17