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What Happened in St. Louis?

Ken Briggs | Aug. 11, 2012 NCR Today

Granted, trying to fashion a policy agreeable to 900 sisters is no mean task, given the striking varieties of views within the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Maybe what emerged -- a pledge to talk more with the bishops along with a vague suggestion that the LCWR might run out of patience -- is the best response possible under the circumstances.

But to see that as a favorable outcome rather than a sad defeat requires some assumptions that are difficult for me to grasp.

Perhaps the greatest is that there is a discussion to be had. Where is the evidence that the Vatican or the three bishops picked to shape up the LCWR have the slightest inclination to conduct any sort of open reconsideration of conclusions their superiors in the CDF have already declared non-negotiable.

Then there is the assumption that a precondition to answering the CDF's demands is to recognize sisters as "equals in the church" whose religious mission, already censured, is "respected and affirmed." Wasn't utter rejection of those ideals at the core of the Vatican's attack? To repeat it in case someone had missed the point?

Further, it's necessary to take for granted that the LCWR is modeling another way of being the church -- more caring, egalitarian and tolerant -- rather than resorting to the old way of submitting to male authority, transforming anger rather than sublimating it.

Another idea taken for granted is that the sisters have taken the high road of love and forgiveness rather than the low road of outright protest. Rome issues thunderbolts and the sisters pursue a better path that will redeem them in the end. Differing with superiors has been considered rebellious anger especially among women.

That leads to the assumption that the LCWR is wise to adopt the non-violence of civil rights movements beginning in the modern age with Gandhi without the need to confront injustice squarely and with a degree of toughness (no, not fury but firmness) that is displayed by their opponents. Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day and Bishop Tom Gumbleton, among others, have employed peaceful tactics while stoutly refusing to accept the terms of injustice. They didn't shy from principled confrontation.

Finally, to be effective, the "out" group like coal miners are assumed to have leverage of some sort against abuse. Sisters, it seems to me, have little now. Their warning that the bishops won't be allowed to damage the integrity of their mission is inspiring, and I hope it's true, but it's highly unlikely to move the three wardens assigned to rid them of beliefs and practices deemed illegitimate. Declaring their independence from Vatican control would cost them and their mission dearly, and it's hard to believe most sisters would prefer to go it alone.

Perhaps the inner workings of the week in St. Louis covered all those bases and that my assumptions will prove unjustified. I can only imagine how arduous it was to decide what to do under such momentous conditions. At the risk of being wrong from this distance, relying only on news reports and commentary, I'm disappointed at final resolution from St. Louis. I'm afraid it has done little to challenge the unjust charges made against LCWR

and concedes too much to the authority that leveled them.

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