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Mercy Sister Theresa Kane criticizes church hierarchy

Thomas C. Fox | Sep. 29, 2009

Theresa Kane

Speaking at the 40th anniversary conference of the National Coalition of American Nuns in St. Louis, Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane offered a stinging rebuke to the Vatican for its treatment of women in general and of women religious in particular.

Referring to the Vatican investigation of U.S. women religious initiated last December by Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, who heads the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Kane called it ?a sign of impotence in the church hierarchy.?

?Regarding the present interrogation, I think the male hierarchy is truly impotent, incapable of equality, co-responsibility in adult behavior,? she said, not mincing any words. ?In the church today, we are experiencing a dictatorial mindset and spiritual violence.?

But she described herself as a hopeful person. ?Why do we hope and why do we endure?? she asked. ?I have one chance, one life, and therefore I have a responsibility to criticize. Our hope comes from solidarity between women religious and laywomen.?

Kane, widely viewed as an influential voice among women religious, has a place of prominence in the history of U.S. women religious. As president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1979, she greeted Pope John Paul II at the National Shrine in Washington, D.C. In her address she urged him to open all ministries of church life to women. Her remarks made headlines around the world.

Addressing the conference Sept. 26 at the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet?s motherhouse, she recalled the long struggle of U.S. women religious to gain modest control of their own destinies. She related how women religious leaders in the early 1970s worked to change the name of their organization from the Conference of Major Superiors of Women to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, adding that the Vatican has never come to terms with the idea that women can be ?leaders.?

Kane said there is a proper place for anger. ?If we do not get angry, we won?t make change,? she said. And change can come, she noted. Years back, she recalled, women were required to cover their heads when in

church ? ?even using tissue paper, if necessary.? After a while women simply stopped the practice and the requirement ended. She called it a ?silent revolution.?

In the context of resistance she talked about women?s ordination in the Catholic church today. ?The Roman Catholic women priesthood is small, highly criticized, and not going away,? she went on. ?No one controls our future but ourselves.?

Kane, as the nation?s most identifiable advocate of women?s ordination, has been repeatedly asked if she fears a Vatican excommunication. Her response: ?I?m not out of communion. The institution got out of communion with me.?

The National Coalition of American Nuns, or NCAN as it is commonly referred to, since its inception has been an advocate for change inside and outside the church. It is said to officially represent from 500 to 2,000 U.S. women religious, though its influence among women religious appears wider as it has taken on hot-button issues that other religious organizations generally shy away from. In the process it has been a kind of Vatican ?worst fear? for a women religious group.

Kane described NCAN as a ?small, passionate, visionary group of women.?

The coalition, meanwhile, gave its annual Margaret Ellen Traxler Award, named after the late founder of NCAN, to Charity Sr. Louise Lears, who was banned from church ministries and from receiving the sacraments last year by then-St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke for her support of the right for women to be ordained in the Catholic church. The day after Burke punished Lears, he left his St. Louis post to head the highest court in the Catholic church, the Apostolic Signatura at the Vatican.

In August 2008, Lears moved to Baltimore to assist her aging mother. She now teaches ethics and medical ethics at Maryland?s Towson University.

The nuns? coalition board selected Lears for her willingness to stick her neck out and for the compassion and justice manifested in her whole life. ?Her demeanor before, during and after the archbishop?s edict has inspired

countless Catholics to live the Gospel, work toward a Vatican II vision of church, and speak one?s truth in love,? said the award statement.

The NCAN board also unanimously adopted a resolution calling upon President Obama ?to stand up to the forces of fear and hatred and refuse to continue our country?s war against Afghanistan.? The resolution read: ?We commend your call for a temporary hiatus in troop buildup; however, neither an increase in troops nor Orwellian ?death-by-drones? programs will ensure a peaceful future for either of our countries.?

Eileen Purcell, cofounder of the sanctuary movement in the 1980s and former executive director of the SHARE Foundation, spoke on worker justice in society.

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