

The Vatican and the nuns square off

RITA WATSON

The Vatican is trying to rein in the nuns. It seems that some 80 percent of the remaining 57,000 sisters in the U.S. are members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).

Nuns taught many of us in Catholic schools. It is perplexing to see the pope appoint a trio of bishops essentially to revamp their organization. Today, even many of those who nuns once warned would be tossed into hell for kissing boys in the schoolyard side with nuns under fire for advocating social justice rather than promoting Vatican mandates against being pro-choice on abortion rights and against same-sex marriage.

Forget the image of the ruler-wielding nun, dubbed the Penguin in "The Blues Brothers" film. Although our nuns were quick with the rulers, today, with Catholic schools dwindling, nuns are better known for working to meet the needs of the people.

Unwilling to accept Pope Benedict XVI's plan to revamp the LCWR, Sister Pat Farrell, president, and Sister Janet Mock, executive-director, traveled to Rome to discuss the issues. They will also meet in mid-August at an LCWR general assembly of more than 900 attendees to determine how to proceed. They do not appear to be backing down.

The Vatican views as a culprit Network, a social-advocacy lobby formed in 1971 in response to Vatican II. Recently members of Network completed a nine-state "Nuns on the Bus" tour that ended at the U.S. Capitol, where they protested the Republican budget program. Sister Simone Campbell, Network's executive director, is a feisty woman who saw the Vatican censure of LCWR and the group's friendly ties with Network as an opportunity to "use the attention" to serve the people.

Their bus tour turned them into celebrities, with Sister Simone appearing on "The Colbert Report" and "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" as they heard Rush Limbaugh add nuns to his "feminazi" list.

Stephen Colbert asked Sister Simone if the nuns were radical feminists. She replied: "We're certainly oriented toward the needs of women and responding to their needs. If that's radical, I guess we are."

America Magazine, a Jesuit publication

founded in 1905, noted that Cardinal Bernard Law instigated Vatican action against the nuns. As archbishop of Boston he resigned as a result of sex-abuse scandals there. Also, America noted that the Franciscans are in solidarity with the sisters.

The Rev. David L. Stokes Jr., an associate professor of theology at Providence College, sides with Rome. An Episcopal priest before converting to Catholicism, Father Stokes explained:

"Since Vatican II a number of nuns have become 'dehabited' souls in a desperate search to be relevant. Many have lurched from issue to issue, and the scandal of the Gospel has been watered down to a mealy liberal ethic. Likewise, in keeping with the last four decades, whenever the Vatican poses the question of whether or not there is such a thing as Catholic doctrine, many sisters react as if it were the Spanish Inquisition come again."

Father Stokes did note: "However, if Cardinal Law is behind the scenes instigating Vatican action, as apparently pointed out by America Magazine, this would be, of course, unfortunate. For most Americans, Cardinal Law is hardly the point-man for theological integrity. Still, I think Pope Benedict and the Vatican are right on target on this one."

Ironically an excerpt from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in the Bulletin from the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul (in Providence) on July 15, 2012, states: "Without religious liberty properly understood, all Americans suffer, deprived of the essential contribution in education, health care, and social services that Americans make every day, both here at home and overseas."

For supporters of nuns in organizations pushing for social justice — it seems they are doing just what is stated — understanding and promoting education, health care and social services. What might be the catch is a turn on the words and interpretation of "religious liberty properly understood."

One might look at this statement and wonder, "Are the bishops saying that they properly understand religious liberty, but the nuns do not?" Whatever happened to "actions speak louder than words"?

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DITOR Projo 8/9/12

Truth to hierarchy

I commend Rita Watson for her Aug. 5 Commentary piece ("The Vatican and the nuns square off"). She offered a clear and concise explanation of a confrontation which many Catholics know little about.

I also commend The Journal for printing the article. Many newspapers tend to ignore anything that might displease the Catholic hierarchy or prod its members into discussion.

Too many clerics believe that they control the action of the spirit. The nuns should be highly praised for their willingness to "speak truth to authority."

The New Testament constantly speaks to an authority shared by the entire Christian faithful, "one body, one spirit." Paul's grasp of leadership has been covered over by Roman Empire organizational practice and the feudal system that followed it.

As for the Rev. David Stokes's comments, he clearly stands with those who seek to return to a form of Catholicism that existed and was found wanting before Vatican II.

Catholics frequently join the Episcopal Church to find a spiritual freedom that is constrained for them in the Roman Church; Episcopalians (especially priests) move to the Catholic Church, seeking a system of Christianity that recreates the power and constraint of the past few centuries.

We all seek truth and it is normally found within love, not a sledgehammer. Christianity is encompassing enough to be open to all the varied gifts of the spirit.

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