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Who will watch the watchmen of America's women religious?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Apr. 24, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side

The sound you hear all across Catholic America today is that of Rachel's weeping again over the unnecessary and undeserved suffering that has been heaped by a righteous-sounding Cardinal William Levada, the pope's man at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on the women religious of this country.

This event is one of epic sadness because it symbolizes how an organized church undercuts the immense good it does at its best by doing near to its hypocritical worst in an attack as coordinated as a terrorist strike on the heroic women who deserve credit for building the church in America into the most successful realization of Catholicism in history.

Only ambitious men "making," in the apt Italian phrase, "a career in the church" could have designed this bad-faith betrayal of the leaders of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious who had arrived in Rome for a dialogue with Cardinal Levada only to learn that the news of the empowering of a panel of bishops to supervise them had already been sent to the American bishops for public distribution.

The bishops, never strong on self-observation, apparently miss the irony of their feeling that the pillars of orthodoxy had been shaken because themes of feminism had been discussed by some of the speakers at the annual gatherings of the leadership group. Feminism in general raised its voice in response to the centuries of women being subjugated by men who were generally bigger, stronger but not necessarily smarter than women. Feminism in particular began to whisper inside the Catholic church as a delayed reaction to exactly the same conditions.

As a now-dead colleague of mine, Fr. Charles A. Curran -- the psychologist, not the distinguished moral theologian -- once observed, "Many men in the Church are only comfortable with their mothers or with the Blessed Mother, especially if she is an unmoving statue with glass eyes and a marble body."

Only that inability to enter into a serious, face-to-face relationship with adult women, such as the leaders of American women religious, can explain how the leadership of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith could go through a charade of treating these women seriously when a jaundiced judgment on their lives and work had already been dispatched to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Irony is cubed by the announcement that Archbishop Peter Sartain of Seattle has been fully empowered for a period of five years at least to oversee the LCWR by, among other things, revising their statutes, reviewing their plans and programs and creating new programs for them. He and his panel of Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., and Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, can also review and offer guidance on liturgical texts and review their other organizations and institutes. Rome is treating what, at the worst, falls short of being even venial sins as if they were unforgivable offenses against the Spirit for which a penance equivalent to capital punishment is prescribed.

The irony is blinding when we ask who is watching these watchmen, for merely a cursory review of their careers suggests that their lapses and lacks in dealing with God's people suggest they are the ones who should be

investigated, perhaps by a panel from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Archbishop Sartain, who has just politicized his parishes by delegating them to gather signatures against legislation on same-sex marriage, according to the website Christian Child Abuse, played a still-unclarified role while bishop of Joliet, Ill., in ordaining as a priest a seminarian on whose computer gay porn with young boys had been found a few months before. This priest was convicted the next year of sexual assault of an underage boy. The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, SNAP, observed: "Sartain, in our view, had a moral obligation to postpone the ordination, send [the priest] for treatment and inform the public." SNAP president Dave Clohessy later said Sartain "did none of that."

Bishop Leonard Blair is the second person of this apparently unvetted trinity of American bishops who are going to run women's religious life as closely as Dickensian orphanage directors for the next five years. It turns out that SNAP has asked the bishop of Toledo for an explanation as yet apparently unforthcoming about his relationship with a priest in his diocese who was not only accused of child abuse but convicted of murder as well. *The Blade* in Toledo has reported that Bishop Blair had an "agreement" with this priest. SNAP wanted to know what, if anything, he had been paying this priest and what was the content of this supposed letter of agreement between them.

Bishop Thomas Paprocki, the third member of the team, was not added for ballast. His office, according to the Springfield newspapers, is dedicated to hockey and is filled with symbols, ornaments, pictures of the Chicago Blackhawks (he's a big fan) and, of course, his own specially designed hockey helmet. Bishop Paprocki, whom I once came upon as he switched dining assignment cards so that Cardinal Francis George would not have to sit next to the Cook County board president, a Catholic who was pro-choice, is also intent on reviving exorcism. And he is going to judge the maturity of American nuns. You can't make this stuff up.

Nor could you make up the somewhat uncertain record of Cardinal William Levada, who presides over the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which, when it isn't investigating nuns needlessly, is investigating sex abusing priests heedlessly, in the judgment of many. In any case, Levada, according to *The New York Times*, "has a mixed record on sexual abuse." The newspaper reported that in Portland, Levada "did not aggressively pursue a complaint against the Rev. Aldo Orso-Manzonetta," whose many accusations of sexual misconduct with boys were settled after Levada had left "for an undisclosed amount."

Levada's record in San Francisco is controversial because, though many people think he did a good job dealing with priests accused of sex abuse, others contend that at times he did not adequately impose restrictions on priests involved in sex abuse and, on one case, suspended a former U.S. attorney, John F. Conley, with whose reporting a suspected priest sex abuser he disagreed.

Granting that, in all these cases, complications may exist that have not yet been disclosed, the group of watchers, from the chief watcher Cardinal Levada down to the Hockey Fan Watcher, Bishop Paprocki, needs to be watched carefully, if only because they supply the low comedy in the high tragedy of injustice that is being played out before us in this suddenly sad springtime.

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Previous reporting from *NCR* on the Vatican's investigation of LCWR:

- **Vatican investigates U.S. women religious leadership [2]**, April, 2009
- **Women religious meet Vatican accusers in Rome [3]**, April, 2009
- **LCWR seeks full disclosure of Vatican visitation [4]**, August, 2009
- **LCWR leaders meet with Midwest bishops [5]**, May, 2010

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- **LCWR 'stunned' by Vatican's latest move** **[8]**, April 19, 2012
- **Options facing LCWR stark, say canon lawyers** [9], April 19, 2012
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