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Resurrection, the sisters and the power of people

Nicole Sotelo | Apr. 26, 2012 Young Voices

A dictatorship is threatened by that which speaks to the heart of a people. If one can crush that which stirs the soul, a dictator needs not worry about the soul being stirred to resistance.

So it was with the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Beloved at the roots of the population, Neruda was a symbol of the heart of the Chilean people. As such, he was also one of the greatest threats to the rule of Augusto Pinochet.

When Pinochet came to power in 1973, soldiers arrived almost immediately at Neruda's bedside. Finding him on the brink of death from cancer, they left him to die rather than dragging his frail body to be counted among the "disappeared."

Days later, Neruda passed away, and the government breathed a sigh of relief.

It was short-lived.

Officials attempted to keep his funeral from becoming a rally. However, despite a curfew, the Chilean people poured into the streets, unafraid.

During the funeral march, they cried, they sang, they chanted. Their voices rang out against the otherwise quiet, police-controlled streets: "Pablo Neruda! ¡*Presente*! He isn't dead, he has only fallen asleep!"

Having learned the strength of a poem derives from its ability to say one word and mean another, so, too, did the people cry out the name of Pablo Neruda and also mean their own. They shouted that the soul of Chile was not dead, not crushed, but merely awaiting an inevitable resurrection -- a revolution.

Historians look back at the funeral procession and recognize it for what it was: the beginning of the resistance.

In the week since the Vatican's publication of the *Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*, I have thought often of this story from Chile, where my grandmother was born, and of the power of a people who are stirred at injustice.

Since the document's publication, Catholics across the country have raised their voices at the injustice of the Vatican's assessment. Whether by petition or in person, by Facebook or Twitter, people are declaring their solidarity with one of the deepest cultural symbols of Catholicism that the Vatican appears to have threatened: the sisters.

Now, to be sure, the Vatican is not a military dictatorship, nor Catholics an occupied people. The Vatican does not have armored tanks.

However, the Vatican has rolled out one of its most powerful ecclesial weapons from its doctrinal think tank and aimed it at the heart of what Catholics hold precious: our sisters.

These sisters might not necessarily have taught us about poetry, but they did teach millions of us how to understand Scripture. We know that the strength of the Gospel, like poetry, derives from its ability to tell one story and have it speak to another. What the Gospel said 2,000 years ago about care for the marginalized and speaking out against injustice can speak to a situation today.

As one sees Catholics speaking out on behalf of the sisters, it is clear that we learned this Gospel lesson well.

Initially, the Vatican document might have seemed a death knell against the way of life of women religious today. Instead, it has become a rallying cry for Catholics to show their solidarity and appreciation for the sisters; a way to show that the resurrection story of the Gospels is a story for today.

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