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LCWR move is puzzling even to those outside Catholicism

Bill Tammeus | May. 30, 2012 A small c catholic

As a Protestant, I have, as usual, been looking in from outside Catholicism at a running news story -- and finding myself profoundly puzzled.

News of the Vatican's condemnation of the largest organization representing Catholic nuns in the United States -- the Leadership Conference of Women Religious [1] -- is not of the same magnitude as the long-running story of sexual abuse and cover-up in the church. But in its own way, it is needlessly damaging the church -- and not just the Catholic church, but the church universal.

It says to non-Christians that women cannot be trusted to think for themselves, to order their lives in ways that make sense, to take reasonable positions on issues, to be autonomous human beings outside the control of males.

I understand that some of these interpretations of what the Catholic church is saying to its women religious may be unfair, but as we all know, perception often trumps reality.

And the perception that the Catholic church -- to say nothing of religion in general -- has a history of treating women as second-class citizens is not without evidence. My own Presbyterian denomination, for instance, refused to ordain women as clergy until 1956.

As Anne M. Butler, a professor emerita of history at Utah State University, wrote in a recent *New York Times* piece [2], "... tension between American nuns and the church's male hierarchy reaches much further back" than the current issue with the LCWR.

Butler, previewing her upcoming book about Catholic sisters in the American West, wrote that these nuns' "determination in the face of a male hierarchy that, then as now, frequently exploited and disdained them was a demonstration of their resilient faith in a church struggling to adapt itself to change."

Those of us outside of Catholicism find it unfathomable that the church, then or now, would exploit or disdain the women who have committed their lives to doing ministry in Christ's sacred name. But that's what the current controversy over the Vatican's action says to many of us.

Over the years, I've known quite a few Catholic nuns -- some of them well enough that they would share with me their hopes for (and frustrations about) working within the church.

In every case, I have been impressed with their commitment, even when I couldn't imagine how they could stay true to their vows while working within the broader American culture that must have tempted them to seek power, fame and wealth outside the church.

Oh, it's not that all sisters are perfect vessels of compassion and humility, but they are great treasures of the church. They educate children, tend to the sick, comfort the afflicted, seek justice, uplift the downtrodden and on and on.

They are, in short, the body of Christ for a wounded world.

Are there rules for how such people organize their lives and ministry? Of course. There must be. But when those rules overwhelm and undermine the very ministry God has called these women to do, something is amiss.

This LCWR case is fostering the perception among non-Catholics -- and, no doubt, among many Catholics, too -- that the church doesn't value women religious but instead, in Anne Butler's words, exploits and disdains them.

It pleased me when non-Catholic groups, including some Presbyterian women, stood up for [3] the Catholic sisters in this case.

Their letter of support should have been told the Catholic hierarchy that people outside of Catholicism notice what goes on in the church and sometimes react to it in ways that should dismay the hierarchy.

These Presbyterians and others sent a strong and obviously necessary message that when, as one seminary professor called them, "communities of sisters in Christ" are attacked, such communities will "stand together."

If the Vatican wishes to stake out a position that strikes much of the world as exploiting and disdaining such sisters, its leaders should know others are watching, and that defending that position will be far too costly to continue.

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