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Apart from the Anger

Ken Briggs | Jun. 14, 2012 NCR Today

It wouldn't surprise me if the bishops and the sisters who squared off against each other in Rome this week actually liked and respected one another.

They were nurtured in the same church and love its inner nature. They became part of the talented leadership that furthered a rich tradition.

Tragic, then, that they faced each other as strangers, shaped by experiences that inevitably placed them in distant spheres of understanding and sensibility.

By entering seminary, the bishops embraced a society with its own customs and predilections, oriented largely toward preservation of its prerogatives and disciplines.

By entering religious communities, the LCWR sisters sometimes unwittingly took on a mission that had opened to the world, making them susceptible to the thoughts, trials and vocations of a larger sector of what Vatican II described as the "people of God."

The ordained realm changed some of its practices and trappings but remained decidedly enclosed in a self perpetuating system.

Sisters followed the muses they discovered in their growing contacts with wider humanity and from their insights as women.

Could anything better illustrate how theology derives from experience? Or how impossible it is to achieve anything like theological uniformity.

The Protestant Reformation gave historical witness to this experience-based diversity. It was already there but Luther and Calvin made it visible in a manner not seen since Eastern Orthodoxy split from Rome.

It's human nature I suppose. Once the Reformation had popped the lid, the trend went viral. Denominations multiplied like cell mitosis. Theological fine points too easily became reasons for divisions more often than instances where vastly different experiences had taken groups within particular traditions to new churches.

Distinct circumstances filtered through similar religious orientation has yielded two widely different versions of what it means to be Catholic, bishops and sister, and they view each other across continents, literally and figuratively. The fact that they don't speak the same language or walk similar paths is an outcome of history rather than a conscious desire to dispute each other.

It doesn't mean that behind their formal opposition and the momentous consequences it may portend that they don't sometimes admire the person across the way from the different land.

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