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Fifty years later and still a Nun on the Bus

RoseAnne Cleary | Nov. 2, 2012
Commentary

Fifty years ago last month, I joined a large group of other teenaged girls on the road to becoming a Dominican sister. As with any milestone, one asks, "Where did the time go?" I would like to use this personal occasion to look at the nun's role then and now.

As it appeared to me in 1962, the uniformity of our garb and our ubiquitous presence in elementary parochial schools seemed reliable constants, fitting well with the attribute that the church was "universal." As opposed to the ideals of the "Me Generation" -- our contemporaries -- individual self-discovery and personal fulfillment were seen as counter-productive to becoming good community members, a clear and oft-stated goal.

Just a few years later, the Second Vatican Council found us an open, resilient group of 20-year-olds, eager to step up to the demands of any new challenge. The first of us to be assigned to a store-front ministry in Brownsville, Texas, during the Civil Rights Movement opened the door to all kinds of pastoral outreach: teenaged mothers, young parolees, children of women inmates, addicts and more. Sisters began to live where they were needed, which was often in small groups, in poor and often dangerous neighborhoods. Others asked to continue studies in administration and other specialty fields so as to eventually fill demands in those areas. Ultimately, in addition to focusing on the material needs of the disenfranchised, sisters participated in neighborhood dialogue to achieve more effectual results, and communicated with local politicians about the needs of these constituents. Many continued to live in convents, and teach in parish schools while completing degrees after school and weekends, a path on which I was content and fulfilled.

In appearance, nuns no longer seemed to be in uniform. There were modified looks that could easily identify a sister, but without the excess yardage and discomfort of the old habit and veil. There was also the option of wearing simple street clothes. The foundresses of many orders, in fact, had worn just that; it was their followers who chose to copy its uniformity. And always, a nun was free to wear the traditional habit.

During the troubled 1960s and '70s, many Catholics expressed dissatisfaction over the changes brought by the Second Vatican Council. Small ones, such as when the altar server would ring the bells, got tossed in with the larger adjustment to the Mass in English. Sometimes you couldn't even tell who was a sister, the complaints went. Things were no longer the same in society. Shouldn't they at least stay the same in church? The ways in which Catholicism was trying to communicate -- even cohabitate -- with the culture created much opposition. So much so that it seemed to bring about a backlash of resentment and conservatism, which I experienced in varied ways. For example, after the council, the catechisms young children were given to use were replaced by bright, gently impressionistic pictures that evoked discussion and simple and spontaneous prayer, with no hint of anything to be memorized. It was a joy to use these books with the children. Soon, however, they were deemed inadequate in doctrine and were replaced with others, complete with questions and answers. Publishers do not invent these changes: An imprimatur was required to sell the books. The previous ones were no longer available and the less appropriate versions have endured.

It was during this period that I chose to withdraw from the Dominicans. Soon after my departure, my parish

invited interested persons to be trained as eucharistic ministers, and I came forward. This opened up avenues of service within the church, without being a sister. After a few Sundays, an incensed (female) parishioner made a vocal objection to the pastor: It was bad enough that women were ministers of Communion, but some were wearing pants! And so the "dress/skirt" requirement went into place.

I think of these incidents and others when I come across criticisms that blame Vatican II for every problem in the church since the 1960s, when I hear the sisters accused of radical feminism, when I read about their critics' wanting to send the sisters back to traditional ministries, and when I observe politicians wanting them to keep out of "politics." I believe it is fear I am hearing, reading and seeing: fear of having the truth spoken and written and enacted. Fear of the new, fear of trust, fear of loss of control.

In the years since leaving my community, while I raised children, taught adults and children in various settings and volunteered in my parish, I have always felt in communion with nuns. And I have observed more and more, that even while fewer women join the orders, and even while the median age of sisters rises past my own age, they seem to be in a constant movement onward: to ministries that did not exist yesterday, with fresh energy that is beyond me, in joyous solidarity with one another, gracious in acceptance of limitations, peacefulness that colors every word, patience that is sweet, graceful in perversity, loving in everything.

Enter the Ryan Budget. Wisconsin Congressman Paul Ryan, even before becoming the Republican vice presidential candidate, he had a clear agenda to solve the nation's budgetary problems on the backs of poor and other vulnerable Americans.

Enter Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of the social advocacy lobby NETWORK. Imaginative, insightful, intelligent. Sr. Simone of the Bill Moyers and Steven Colbert shows. Sr. Simone of the Democratic National Convention's standing ovation. Sr. Simone of the brilliant Nuns on the Bus campaign.

It was a bright, cloudless morning in late September when Sr. Simone brought the Nuns on the Bus to New York City. But on that Monday, Sept. 24, they wouldn't be on a bus, they would be Nuns on the Ferry, the Staten Island Ferry. We gathered near the South Ferry stop of the "E" train. There's a big, lovely plaza there that feeds into the terminal. There was no problem finding the group, even after the bright "Nuns" labels run out. We were about 1,000 strong -- that was the estimate of the ferry security. Some wore signs: "Don't Touch Our Social Security" and "We Are Our Brothers' and Sisters' Keepers." Others worked cellphones, trying to locate friends. The sisters were the oldest ones there, and their joy was most apparent. Sirens and taxi horns sounded as friends shouted greetings.

Then, Sr. Simone stepped forward, microphone in hand. Smiling, greeting, spirited. She talked about the faults of Ryan's budget, and then the values in the alternative -- the Faithful Budget [1] -- agreed upon by Christians, Jews and Muslims. Soon, we were all reciting her "5 simple words: Reasonable Revenue for Responsible Programs." Then everyone boarded the ferry. Our destination was the Staten Island offices of Congressman Michael Grimm, an avid supporter of Ryan's budget. He had played a game of cat-and-mouse with nuns the previous week, always managing to avoid them. We thought we'd get to him that Monday.

But first, we had a 25-minute ferry ride, just enough for a cup of coffee. And it passes right by the Statue of Liberty. Savoring the views of the harbor, some talked intently, some sat companionably, others took photos.

After disembarking, we gathered on the steps of Staten Island Borough Hall. Speakers addressed more aspects of the two budgets. I was glad that now there were news reporters present; they heard that workers earning minimum wage still live below the poverty level, and in our city, that means one in five families. They heard how those on the margins of society would be affected by the budgets. We rejoiced to hear that the U.S. bishops' conference had formally opposed Ryan's budget, so our efforts are in collaboration with them.

This was when we learned Grimm wasn't here. He was in his Brooklyn office -- several train stops away -- and would be happy to meet us there. A few in the contingent made the trek so the congressman could hear their issues. It was reported later Grimm said he felt it was "odd that nuns who dedicate their lives to serving God are focusing on something as political as the Ryan-Romney budget."

As I looked around, I thought of the collective experience of these women, these "radical feminists." I rejoiced in thinking that my sister friends continue to embrace me as one of them, even at this event. (And tease me whenever I say "we.") Many walkers were in sight, canes and oxygen tanks on wheels, all of which had gotten their owners on and off the ferry. I'll soon watch them do it again, and I have a quick impression of Lourdes.

There is a sister sitting on the step beside me, stone steps. Her hands are one over the other, old veined hands, not clasped in resignation, sitting on the stone step, but regularly lifted in a cheer, in applause, in support.

Yet another Nun on the Ferry.

On that day, with those nuns, I recalled the words of a pope that I first heard as a new nun. I walk back on the ferry and begin to write.

"Human society ... must be animated by such love as will make them feel the needs of others as their own."
--John XXIII

[RoseAnne Cleary writes from Middle Village, N.Y.]

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Links:
[1] http://faithfulbudget.org/