

'Next time, let's have the women study the men'

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 15, 2009



Commentary

Say it isn't fair, but when the Vatican announced Jan. 30 it had begun a study of U.S. women's religious congregations, I couldn't help but recall the utterly failed effort by the U.S. bishops in the late 1980s and early 1990s to write a pastoral on women. They were coming off a high then, having written pastorals on peace (1983) and justice (1986). Pastorals were the way of the day then. But before the bishops abandoned this effort, retreating as they did with their ecclesial stoles tucked between their knees, they had become the butt of church jokes and had alienated a sizable number of women.

The women's pastoral was a no-win document from the start. Some women criticized it for the very reason that it was about women in the first place. They argued that anybody with any sense of church function and church structures knew it couldn't possibly address the most volatile and divisive question of the time, the ordination of women. That was the bull in the proverbial china shop.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister summed up the thinking of many when she wrote at the time: "Women aren't the problem? patriarchy is the problem, sexism is the problem, male chauvinism is the problem, a skewed, distorted and enslaved theology of God is the problem. Write papers about those, indeed, but don't write one about women."

It could be argued that talking about a study of Catholic women then and a study of them now is like mixing apples and oranges. I can hear some people saying this time it's different because two American women religious are in charge of the Vatican's "apostolic visitation." After all, women will write the report and return it to the man who commissioned it, Cardinal Franc Rodé, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

But in the final analysis, it is men studying and reporting on men. It will be up to Rodé and his Vatican aides to order some reform or renewal actions in its wake. As much as one might hope to think that good can come from this, I suspect the medium is once again the message. Word on the street indicates that few expect Rodé to follow reception of the visitation study with a grand party, as he should, celebrating the unparalleled achievements of our U.S. women religious.

I feel bad for Mother Mary Clare Millea of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, charged with carrying out

the visitation. She's not the problem; it's structural. What we have here is one more attempted study of women by men, in this case a study by male clerics of women religious. Maybe 50 years ago it might have worked. Maybe. But no longer.

So the study itself, by its very nature, points to a far larger elephant in the sanctuary. For the sake of fairness, next time let's have our women religious study the quality of life of our male clerics. That's a report many would read.

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